

FIVE CENTS

# BRAVE AND BOLD

A DIFFERENT COMPLETE STORY EVERY WEEK

No. 47

WHICH IS WHICH?

or Winning a Name by Proxy



by  
**WELDON J. COBB**

Ned was astride the mad monster. He jabbed the end of the flannel across both horns, and, with a rapid movement, wound coil after coil over them and the eyes of the steer.



# BRAVE & BOLD

*A Different Complete Story Every Week*

Issued Weekly. By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1903, in the Office of the Librarian of Congress, Washington, D. C. STREET & SMITH, 238 William St., N. Y.

No. 47.

NEW YORK, November 14, 1903.

Price Five Cents.

## WHICH IS WHICH?

OR,

## Winning a Name by Proxy.

By WELDON J. COBB.

### CHAPTER I.

#### RUNNING AWAY.

"Ned!"

Six boys were creeping through a patch of corn back of a high barn.

One of them spoke the name in a low whisper. Then they all halted.

"Ned Brooks!"

The repetition was given more audibly, but eager ears were strained in vain.

"Funny, boys!" commented the first speaker.

"I should say so."

"Ned is usually on time"

"Always."

"And in a case like this—a *charivari* on a man who will welcome tin pans about as gracefully as if they were a cyclone—he wouldn't miss it for a farm."

"Hark!"

"Ah-hh-h!"

"What's that?"

It was a groan—deep, dismal and dubious—and seemed to proceed from the structure before them.

"If that was Ned, something's wrong," declared one of the

boys. "You know he said those three old tyrants, his bosses, had learned of some of his carryings on, and might raise a row about it?"

"Three old tyrants, eh?" interrupted a gruff voice. "Well, you young villains! the three are here, and you've guessed what's happened right enough."

"Run, boys! it's the Ormsbys. They've been laying for us."

"No, don't run," spoke the man who had just sprung from a hay pile.

"Not just yet, at any rate," added a second voice, and a second form bobbed up.

"We've something to show you first," supplemented a third, bolting from behind a wagon box.

The three big, rawboned men hemmed in the boys. The latter fluttered like mice in a trap.

"Don't be scared," spoke their first-appearing enemy. "Nobody's going to hurt you. We've been waiting here to teach you a kind of object lesson. You wanted to see Ned? Well, we want to show him to you."

The six boys looked serious. The non-appearance of their leader, the mysterious groan, the mocking manner of the farmer brothers, certainly hinged on some doings or misdoings of their miserable chum.



"They've found out who carried away the tongue of the town bell," was whispered.

"Maybe the secret of setting the chicken coop on top of the liberty pole is out."

"It's all out," broke in the biggest of the farmers, whose ears were keener than the boys guessed, "and forty other things on top of them. Lads, we don't know how many of you have been in those scrapes and scimmages, for Ned won't tell—"

"Hooray for Ned!" piped an enthusiastic voice.

"Shet up! You're in it, that's sure. We'll leave your cases to your families, but as to our own responsibility, we're going to bring Ned up with a short turn. We've stood getting into beds with one leg sawed off, we've tried to guess the wind blew pepper into the coffee, but when the whole town comes down here with a story of changed signs, moved steps and tilted sidewalks, and when Ned ties a bunch of firecrackers to the tail of our prize sixty-dollar heifer and sends her shooting no one yet has found out where, it's time to call a halt."

"So we've sidetracked Ned," put in the second Ormsby.

"And at seven o'clock we're going to give him the licking of his life," added the remaining farmer.

They were turning the curve of the barn at this. Standing against it were three strong hickory limbs. Each of the brothers picked up one.

"I'll dust all the wickedness out of his coat," remarked the elder, stripping the bark from the lithe switch.

"I fancy this will do something more than tickle his vanity," announced his brother, giving the rod a swish that made the air sing.

"We invite you boys to be present at a public ceremony that may do you some good, and will certainly keep Ned from active business in the mischief line for a few days to come," added the other Ormsby, sourly. "Just take a seat in the private box till the performance begins, for begin it will at seven P. M. sharp."

The farmer moved over to a woodpile, as the six boys backed to "the private box" in question—a section of rail fence.

"Whew!" whistled one of them.

"He's in for it," muttered a second. "Boys, it will about kill Ned to be whipped publicly."

"Let's mob those old villains, rescue Ned, and cut for it."

"Yes, but where is Ned?"

Combined attention was fixed on the barn. Its door was padlocked, its upper windows barred. Six pairs of eyes roamed over the expressionless structure, seeking a trace of the accredited leader in every piece of mischief that had set Glendale by the ears since summer began.

Glendale was famous, and Ned Brooks had made it so, and it had come to be natural that when any neighboring villager thought of Glendale, he thought at once and at the same time of Ned.

Scapegrace Ned his uncles, with whom he had lived since he could remember, dubbed him. Thoughtless Ned indulgent mothers with boys in the same category made it out. Thoroughbred

Ned to the core, was the verdict of his chums and confederates, every time!

Ned Brooks was fun personified. To eat, rest or sleep when a piece of rare mischief was in sight or reach, was with him to waste the sunniest moments of life.

The result was that Ned and his chosen familiars had become about as dreaded in the district as the guerrillas, the ku-klux, the white caps, the college raiders of modern history.

"There he is!" suddenly exclaimed an eager voice. "Oh, Ned, hello! I say, Ned!"

Across the unglazed window frame a figure fluttered abruptly.

"Did some one call for the castle moat, or was it fancy?" piped a cheery voice, and two cheery eyes winked and blinked.

"Oh, Ned!" returned dolorous tones in unison.

If they meant to express dread or sympathy, the jolly captive refused to accept the homage. As if enjoying the flavor of his own irrepressible personality immensely, Ned nodded and smiled with careless bravado.

"Ned, you're in an awful fix!" sang up a special chum and friend.

"Well, I've got no medals coming, I guess," answered Ned, coolly.

"They're going to whip you."

"They think they are, yes. Don't waggle and bob so terrifically, boys. I'm not frightened."

"They've found out all about the bell, and the hen coop, and—"

"Why, those are just the chips and sawdust of genius compared to what I've blocked out during my brief period of private retirement," asserted Ned. "But, boys, you're wasting time if you're waiting to see me walloped."

"Are we?"—dubiously.

"Yes. If they try it—"

Ned's eyes flashed. He was about to make some startling declaration when there was an interruption.

Something frightened the boys, and, like a flock of sheep, they took to their heels.

"They're set on clipping my wings, sure," muttered Ned, looking and listening from his eerie prison aloft. "Whipped? No!"

He shut his lips firmly with pride and resolution. He fixed his eyes on the winding, tree-fringed highway, followed it with his glance till it melted into the hills, followed it in imagination over the hills and far away—into a new country, amid new scenes, new faces, a new life.

Suddenly his attention was centered on two forms entering the gate. A queer-looking man was carrying a box. By his side, with a tired, sullen, hangdog air tramped a boy.

They halted and conversed. Then the man opened the box and took out a rolled-up white garment of some kind.

This he handed to the boy, who disappeared in the shrubbery. He himself advanced toward the spot where the three Ormsbys stood.

"Pardon, gents," he began smirkingly, "but which is Mr. Ephriam Ormsby?"



"That's me," nodded Ned's elder relative.

"Man that lost the prize heifer?"

"I'm him; what of it?"

"Here's a note for you. Sent by a friend, Mr. Jackson, of Woodville."

"Know him, certainly," spoke Ormsby, opening the tendered missive. "What's this? 'Here is the man I spoke to you about. He has been doing some wonderful things in his line here, and maybe he can help you.' Oh, I see!" he exclaimed, brightening up; "you're the fellow who pretends to have second sight—hypnotist, clairvoyant?"

"Sir!" demurred the man with dignity, "I am not a fortune teller."

"Well, at any rate you pretend to be able to restore lost articles, find the stolen and all that?"

"I pretend nothing. By my occult science I employ certain mystic faculties to divine what is hidden from the common eye."

"Ah! and you want a chance to find my lost heifer?"

"I offer my services, certainly."

"Can you do it?"

"I found your friend's stolen watch. I can try on your property. I guarantee nothing. The influence may not be favorable in your especial case."

"What's your charges?"

"Ten dollars. That includes the trance dream, the tracking, the mystic spell, *et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.*"

Ormsby reflected. He was evidently impressed.

"It's a bargain," he declared finally.

"Abacadabracandra!" muttered the man in an impressive bass tone that sounded like a hoarse frog croak.

From the shrubbery where Ned had seen the boy proceed with the white, folded-up garment a minute previous, a figure stepped into view.

That it was the same boy Ned was sure. The white garment, an enveloping robe, now covered him from head to foot.

It came up clear over his face, with two small round apertures cut for eye holes.

"Well!" ejaculated Ormsby, starting back.

"What's this, now?"

"This," announced the man grandiloquently, "is my mystic assistant—the celebrated dream tracker."

## CHAPTER II.

### THE DREAM TRACKER.

Ned Brooks had never seen nor heard of a "dream tracker."

He was awed and impressed, and so were the four men below, who stared weirdly at the boy who resembled a scarecrow wrapped up in a sheet.

"That's your hocus-pocus, is it?" grinned the elder Ormsby, trying to treat the layout derisively, but all the same very much interested and curious.

"This is my mystic aid," corrected the man solemnly; "you employ me?"

"Can you find the heifer—that's the question?"

"I can try, that's my answer. It was a good enough one for your friend, Mr. Jackson, when he lost his gold watch."

"Go ahead. I'll pay the ten dollars."

The man looked at the western sky.

"The sun will be down in half an hour," he said. "The best influences don't work till then. I want to make trance preparations on the boy. Where can I have a few minutes' quiet? This will do. Oh, it's locked."

The stranger had advanced to the barn, as if choosing its seclusion for his alleged initiatory operations. Ormsby unlocked its door, and man and boy disappeared.

Ned began poking the hay in the loft away from a crack between the boards with his foot, and tried to look down.

As his arms were tied behind him, however, and the rope securing them ran to a ring in a rafter, he did not meet with much success.

He could catch occasional words, and the gruff tones in which the man spoke and the surly snarl in which the boy replied, did not impress him as suggesting the august tones of traditional sages, or the weird, mystic incantations of the magic fate-dreamers he had read about.

They seemed to be quarreling over two dollars some villager had paid them for locating an oil well on his lot, and the boy said something that sounded like "he'd blow the whole game if he wasn't paid his share on the nail head."

Anyway there was none of the pretended trance preparations. The man went out of the barn, closed the door and set its padlock, and a minute later Ned saw a head come above the ladder hatch.

It was that of the dream-tracker boy. He looked pleased as he saw lots of hay in sight, selected a soft heap and threw himself on it with the luxurious sigh of a person dead done out with weariness.

Ned studied him in silence for a minute. There was nothing very weird about the celebrated dream tracker except celebrated dirt. He was untidy, scowling, grimed. He looked as if the world was treating him hard, and he was continually sulking about it.

"Hello!" ventured Ned, as the boy closed his eyes as if for a nap, pending sundown operations.

"Eh? who are you?" retorted the other, sitting up, frowning at being disturbed.

"I'm—I'm a fellow in trouble, and I'll thank you to set my arms loose, will you?"

The dream-tracker boy arose with no cordial grace, but he untied the ropes. Then he bobbed back into his nest of hay as if moments of rest were precious. Ned rubbed his chafed and aching wrists gratefully.

"What a relief! And thank you——" he began.

"Oh, keep the change," yawned his companion.

"Eh?" stared Ned.

"Don't make a fuss about nothing," translated the boy irritably.



"Say," protested Ned, curiously, "won't you tell me something?"

"Well, what is it?"

"Your dream business! Does that man really find things? do you trace things? does the bird——"

The contemptuous look on the boy's face checked Ned's innocent questioning.

"Well, for something green as grass right off the hat, you're the whole pie crust!" he jeered. "Does he find things? Yes, the nearest tavern when he's got his skates on."

"When he's——" began Ned, dubiously.

"Say!" ejaculated his informant impatiently, "where have you been brought up, anyway? See here! old Mapleson is a fake—f-a-k-e—see?"—and with a delusive laugh at Ned's puzzled face, the boy turned over on his side and proceeded to go to sleep.

Ned rubbed his chin reflectively. Evidently he was not high enough up in current city patter to hold a conversation with this post-graduate, who a minute later was snoring loudly.

Peering from the window, Ned saw the strange man seated on the doorstep of the house, making away with a quart measure of milk and some doughnuts, while his host, Ephriam Ormsby, stood drinking in the wonderful tales he was narrating.

Then Ned slipped downstairs. Over a hook hung the dream boy's white garment where he had thrown it.

Ned pushed at the front door, but found the padlock caught. Then he paced the barn floor restlessly.

"Just to get out," he breathed anxiously, "before the licking bee begins! Yes, I have fully made up my mind. There's too much to face here, all coming at once—I'm going to slope!"

"Gruffy and those other two are watching the barn," he reported, spying through a crack. "They'll attend to me while the others are gone in search of the heifer. There's only one show—that's to bolt out suddenly the minute the door's opened. Yes, I'll be ready; they're coming."

Dusk was coming, too. The sleek old humbug by Ephriam Ormsby's side had apparently decided that "the influences were favorable" at last. Talking volubly, he led the way to the barn. Ned looked a trifle uneasy as the others all followed after him, making a sort of circle around the entrance.

"Five ready to grab me," he muttered in a flutter of indecision. "It's a risk. Hold on! Yes, he's snoring up there safe enough, and——"

"Abacadabracandra!" proceeded in majestic tones from the lips of the man outside, and the padlock jangled.

Open swung the door, but it did not witness the wild dash for liberty Ned had meditated.

A better plan had suggested itself to his mind, and he had instantly followed its promptings.

Heavy breathing overhead told him that the real dream-trailer was slumbering profoundly; lifting the white sheet garment from the hook, the pretended dream-tracker enveloped himself and stood at the threshold of the opening door.

"Hello, you are brisk," the man was surprised into exclaiming.

"Play it majestic, play it slow and dignified. We can tap every

man in the district if we find the heifer on top of the watch," whispered the old humbug, pressing close to the side of his supposed assistant.

But Ned was not in a frame of mind to "play it slow." His guide, holding his arm, tried to force him along the smooth, easy path leading to the road.

Through the sheet peep-holes Ned saw one of his remaining relatives shaping his hickory switch to a final point; the other was seated on the barn door threshold, as if it would not be worth while closing it with the announced licking now due.

"They'll find I've slipped off as soon as we're out of sight," reflected Ned, and despite pinches and growlings on the part of his companion, he made a bee line for the brush patch at one side, where pursuit would be more difficult.

"It's strong on him—I tell you the magnetic fever is just a-whooping in this here boy to-night!" declared the man. "Drat you! ain't an easy road better'n these brambles?" he whispered to his supposed confederate, with a vicious dig in the ribs.

"Strong is it, hey?" muttered Ephriam Ormsby. "That's good. I allowed that the heifer wandered into some swamp and was drowned. It's two days since we missed it, and we searched everywhere."

"Ah! but not with the eye of science, sir. No, I reckon not. The eye of science, sir—the occult orb, the magic sense. Why! this boy is charged with magnetism like a battery."

Ned hurried them on, made a dozen windings, put all the difficult distance possible between themselves and the barn, where his escape might be discovered at any moment.

They had gone nearly a mile, they were far out of earshot of the barn.

Desperately determined to make the final break now, Ned had given a jump forward, bent on tearing loose his companion's fixed grasp.

The maneuver landed the man across a dead stump. Ned's foot caught in a vine. He plunged through a gap in a lot of bushes.

"You did it a-purpose; I'll whack you!" ejaculated the infuriated man, still prostrate, but making a grab for Ned.

His hand caught the robe. As Ned pulled it split up the back. Over his head it came. Dusk was deepening, but it was not sufficiently dense to hide from the man's astounded gaze the true personality of his supposed accomplice.

"W-what!" he exploded. "N-not!"

"Oh!" cried Ned suddenly, with a thrill. "Oh!" he repeated with a shock. "Sh! Don't blab to him—your boy's back at the barn. Look! Feel! See!"

The man's eyes goggled. A new surprise robbed the old one of its intensity. As Ned fell his hand swept a soft furry surface.

There was a whimper and a movement, and, pushing aside the foliage, he saw, lying there hidden, sick, maybe hurt, but still alive, the strayed heifer.

"Sir!" shouted the man, springing up excitedly and approaching Ormsby, "the ways of the occult are wonderful—sir, when I said twenty dollars——"

"Ten, you mean."



"Exactly, fifteen dollars, I say it's cheap. Here, sir, is your lost heifer. The occult is vindicated——"

Ned did not linger to hear the balance of the bombastic tirade. Free of the sheet robe, he crept through the shrubbery, gained an opening, ran like a deer and paused only when he had put two miles between himself and possible pursuit, hot as fire, large as life, happy as a king.

### CHAPTER III.

#### A BAD START.

"The right door or the left—which?"

Ned Brooks spoke the words—a new Ned, a changed Ned, two weeks older, two weeks shabbier, versed in a hard city experience that, looking back, seemed like two years.

Ned stood in the entry to a building on a busy Chicago street. It was a hall about twelve feet square. On one side was a door, on the other side was a door.

"He came in here—didn't I see him?—he's gone through one of those doorways. Which? Bah!"

Ned turned the right and then the left knob, and fell back with an exclamation of defeat.

"No go," he continued blankly. "They're locked. He must have had a latchkey. Hello! Here's something I didn't notice."

In a dark corner a big sign was tilted face toward the wall, and Ned fancied he saw chinks of light beyond one sloping side.

"Sure enough," he uttered, advancing and inspecting. "Here's creeping space, and there's a hole right through the brick side of the building. I do believe the fellow went this way. He didn't exactly look like a person with latchkeys and such luxuries—no, he looked worse than when I first saw him, worse even than I do, and that," sighed Ned, with a rueful glance at his apparel, "is pretty tough. Now, wherever does that hole go to?"

There were cobwebs over the sign, as if it had stood there for a long time, and it was covered with dust. Ned didn't mind that. He crept forward. A jagged hole was reached. About twenty bricks had been burrowed out of the side wall in some pipe-laying or wire-stringing work and the gap never repaired.

Ned wriggled his head through the hole to get a view beyond, turned squarely around, started his feet through the aperture, let his body slip after it, hung for a minute, and dropped about four feet into broad daylight with a curious, interested:

"I declare!"

For Ned stood in as queer, cozy and unheard-of a snugery as the heart of a great city ever boasted. The peculiar avenue of entrance to the spot was mysterious enough in all reason, the spot itself was an oasis, a green jewel set down in a desert as secluded, as apparently unknown to surrounding thousands, as if it were buried deep in the heart of the wilderness.

On two sides and the rear the unwindowed brick walls of surrounding buildings ran up a hundred feet, while a great sign-board covered the whole front of the lot, shutting it in from all outside view.

The lot itself was overgrown with bushes and stunted trees,

the wreck of a garden that had flourished here when the broken-down structure in its center was a modern residence.

This building was fast going to pieces. Below half the windows were gone, aloft its toppling tower was supported by braces running to the nearest brick wall.

"It's deserted and silent as the grave," breathed Ned. "Surely no one lives here. Did that boy come here? What a queer feeling!"

The "queer feeling" described was to realize that here he was housed like an anchorite amid grewsome coolness, isolation, while the city's hum and roar beat against the protecting sign in front like a tumultuous sea.

Suddenly Ned started up, his face expanded eagerly.

"Hello!" he called out, and made toward a figure coming from the house.

"Eh? hello yourself! Who are you? what brought you—Oh!"

His challenger halted. It was the dream-tracker boy—the one whose sheet garment Ned had donned, whose identity Ned had stolen two weeks since.

He was more sullen-faced and ragged than ever. With a lowering eye he regarded the intruder, but Ned smiled in his frank, impetuous way.

"Know me?" he queried brightly. "Don't scowl so dreadfully. I suppose you don't care much for me, for I played you quite a trick back at Glendale."

"Yes, you did."

"But you helped me out of the fix of my life. Out of it?" corrected Ned, with an abrupt grimace. "I hardly know that; for if the two weeks I've spent here is what they call city life, I've had a dose."

"What do you want?"

The dream-boy chopped off his words as if they were bits of kindling wood.

"Why, I hardly know," responded Ned, a trifle embarrassed. "Truth is, I was pining for a whiff of home, hungry for the sight of a friend. There's no fun here—all hard grubbing. When I got sight of you on the street outside it was like a gleam of sunshine to see a face I knew. I had to put after you. Why, what's the matter?"

Ned started back. His companion had caught his arm excitedly. The dream-boy was no dream as to either cheerfulness or cordiality, that was sure, but his surly face now relaxed.

"Hold on!" he jerked out, facing Ned. "Just thought of it. Look here!"

Ned looked here, there, everywhere, but received no enlightenment. The dream-boy was looking steadfastly at him, as if studying some scheme concerning him.

"I'm going to tell you something," he said.

"Yes?" nodded Ned.

"You know the fakir—Mapleson?"

"The man who finds things?"

"Finds nothing!" snorted the boy contemptuously. "The fakir,



the old fraud! I've known him to my cost. Well, he shipped me at Glendale."

"Sent you adrift?"

"Yes, drat him!" uttered the boy bitterly. "The miserly old hunks! Your uncles were so tickled over his finding the heifer that they invited him to stay all night. The next morning, when we started on, he was chipper as a lark, seemed to have got the big head all of a sudden, gave me a dollar and told me the partnership was dissolved."

"Why?"

"He said he'd struck something better than risking tar and feathers for bamboozling grangers. I reminded him that he owed me ten dollars by rights. 'You busy yourself finding the boy who cut stick from here last night,' says he, 'and I'll make it ten times ten.'"

"Meaning me?"

"Yes."

"Why, how queer!" commented the puzzled Ned.

"He said it; I forgot it. I see, now, that I've accidentally run across you again."

"See what?"

"Are you in for a spec?" demanded the dream-boy.

"A spec?" repeated Ned, slowly. "You mean——"

"A chance to get grub, a bunk, chink. You look as if you coddled them. Look here—you see this place? I came here to find an old fellow I knew once. I guess he's gone out of business, though, for his furniture's all gone."

"What kind of business?" asked Ned, curiously.

"Eh? why," stammered his informant, "he was a sort of—of broker. But that's neither here nor there. Here's a safe place to roost for a night or two. The police won't disturb us here."

"Who's afraid of the police?"

Ned's companion flushed and scowled, and went on rapidly:

"Mapleson will give me something handsome to find you."

"I don't see why, unless my uncles asked him to."

"They didn't."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I heard them say they wouldn't move a finger after you. You'd chosen your bed and you must lie in it."

"Oh!" muttered Ned, looking down ruefully.

"But Mapleson does want you. Don't tell me! I've studied the old skeesicks closely, and somehow or somewhere, the night he spent at your house, he got on the track of some information that interested him mightily in you, and changed all his plans."

"Nonsense," muttered Ned.

"Is it? Will you test it?"

"How?"

"I think I know where, by a day or two of inquiring, I can get on Mapleson's track."

"Suppose you do?"

"You stay here; I'll forage for grub, and you can be comfortable. If I find Mapleson it's a hundred dollars before I produce you. I'll give you half."

"Fifty dollars?" exclaimed Ned, excitedly. "I'll do just that."

## CHAPTER IV.

### HARD LUCK.

Ned Brooks never thought beyond the immediate present, in the first flush of eagerness and curiosity awakened by the rather startling proposition of the dream-tracker boy.

The fact was that Ned had gone through so hard an experience since coming to the city, that the idea of getting enough to get out of it again dazzled him.

He had certainly struck the seamy side, the ragged edge, ever since the night he reached the great metropolis.

Looking back over it now, it seemed as if he had done little but battle rebuffs, hard knocks, hunger and extreme poverty.

He couldn't go back home—oh, that never!—to be laughed at; but given the chance, he would be willing to try his luck in some quiet village, where things were more familiar than amid this constant clamor for elbow room and bread.

The dream-tracker boy seemed very much impressed with the new idea that had lifted him out of his moodiness. He produced from his breast pocket half a loaf of bread and a couple of smoked herring.

"Now, look here," he said, "things are square if you don't queer them. Here's a cozy bunking place, there's grub enough to last you till to-morrow. I'll take a hunt for Mapleson, and don't you stir away from here till I come back."

The rest of the afternoon was neither lonely nor long to Ned. It was a positive relief to get off the crowded streets, and Ned enjoyed rambling over the quaint house and inspecting its queer crannies and corners. He fell to sleep that night building a wonderful wall of mystery and magic around the funny old hermitage.

Two hours after a light breakfast the next morning, however, he began to tire of the monotony. The dream-boy had not reappeared, and thinking over things in a calmer way, Ned got restless, began to wonder what possible interest Mapleson could have in him that he made his discovery worth a hundred dollars.

"Queer!" ruminated Ned. "Maybe I'm going to strike one of those mysteries they tell about, but what mystery can there be in my humdrum life? Queer fish, those two, boy and man, regular schemers, and queerest of all this queer place. What a den it would be for a lot of counterfeiters! Wonder what the old fellow that boy tells about used it for when he was here?"

Ned determined to take a walk and strolled to the lake front. As he was strolling along, something shining caught his eye. It was a silver dollar. He gave an exclamation of joy as he picked it up. Then he hurried back to the hole in the wall.

Lying upon a rotten bench, at the rear of the dilapidated old house, was the boy who had started out in search of the finder, Mapleson, the day previous.

He jumped up with a startled cry at being suddenly awakened.

"I didn't do it! Don't arrest me! I'll promise——"

"Hey! hey! what are you frightened at?" put in Ned. "It's me, don't you see?"

"Oh, so it is. I dreamed—— Where have you been? I thought you was to stay here till I got back?" said the boy, irritably.



Ned related his experience, and proudly exhibited his silver dollar.

"That will keep us till you find Mapleson, eh?" he asked. "I suppose you haven't yet?"

The dream-boy uttered a sort of disgusted growl.

"No, nor ain't likely to," he vouchsafed.

"Is that so, now?"

"Yes, 'tis."

"I thought you knew people who knew where Mapleson could be found?"

"Well, they don't, for the reason that it's rumored that Mapleson got into some trouble in Indiana and is probably in the lock-up. He's used to that though, the old sinner!"

"Well," declared Ned, "I'm awfully curious to know what he was so anxious to find me about, but if he's that kind of a man I don't know as I care to have anything to do with him."

"I am tired, and discouraged, and sick of life. I wish I was dead," muttered Ned's companion, bitterly.

"Oh, no, you don't!" dissuaded Ned, who was good at cheering up people. "I say, it's none of my concern, but you're a queer coot—act like a cut-and-dried misanthrope at times."

"I should think I would," growled the boy: "I'm that worried, and knocked about, and hounded——"

"Who's hounding you?" put in Ned, shrewdly.

"None of your business," snapped the boy, flushing up smartly. "Tend to your own affairs."

Ned had already about half made up his mind that it was the police who were the hounders.

"Say," began Ned's companion after a pause, with a rather shifting look in his eye, "I've been thinking."

"Have you?" nodded Ned, encouragingly.

"Yes. I've got to get away from the city."

"And I'd like to."

"Then we're two of a mind. It isn't safe for me here, never mind why. Now, then, we've missed on Mapleson, but if we had a little money we might invest it hunting him up, see?"

"Yes, if we had it," asserted Ned, "but we haven't."

"You've got a dollar."

"What does that amount to?"

"Lots. See here, I've a plan," continued the boy eagerly. "You lend it to me, and I'll make twenty dollars out of it."

"I'd like to know how?"

"Well, I will. Old Mapleson taught me something about cards that will make me a winner every time. You stake me with the dollar, and see if I don't rake in a whole potful of shekels."

"Say," protested Ned, indignantly, "I suppose the English of all this is, you want me to gamble?"

"Why—you see——"

"Yes, I see," interrupted Ned, forcibly, "and I simply won't do it!"

For a minute his disappointed companion looked mad enough to fight him, and desperate enough to try to take the money away by force.

Then scowling, muttering, denominating Ned a selfish cat,

threatening that he'd play him even yet, he flounced away to the exit of the lot and left Ned alone.

"He's gone, and I hope for good," muttered Ned. "He's a dangerous companion. I'll leave for good, too, to-morrow. I'll stay here to-night, and then I'll strike for new fields. Where, I wonder? I hope it will come to me what is best to do with the morning."

It did.

For rousing up with daylight Ned discovered that an enemy had visited him while he slept—his late companion had "played him even," as he had threatened.

A rolled-up bundle that Ned had put at the side of his bench couch was missing. It had contained his cap, his coat, his shoes and his treasure nest egg—the silver dollar.

Penniless, half clad, Ned Brooks faced a new day in the great bustling city, forty times worse off than ever.

## CHAPTER V.

### STARTING AFRESH.

"It's a burning shame!"

Ned Brooks knew no more forcible way of expressing his sentiments, but he put all the energy and indignation of his nature into the statement.

He grew hot denouncing the treacherous thievery of his late associate, he grew cold and gloomy as he contemplated his uncomfortable situation.

Then, taking stock of his remaining possessions and prospects, Ned ruefully decided that he was about as near bankrupt as a person could well be and hope to face the world.

An innocent but frivolous record in the past, the possibility of a mystery in his life according to the finder, Mapleson, a sore home-greeting if he ventured back to Glendale, a street gamin's hardships if he lingered in the magnet city—there was the outlook, and it was glum and forbidding enough in all reason.

What was he to do? If applications for work when he had been decently clothed had met with rebuffs because he was friendless and had no references, what kind of a reception could he hoped for attired like a roustabout?

Ned was one of those boys who have to keep moving. The old hermitage had grown distasteful to him—such disagreeable associations had become attached to it. He would have to venture out into the world some time. It might as well be the present, he finally decided.

Ned got into the street by the old avenue of exit. He looked down its crowded pavements timorously.

A scurry ahead of him and some excited shouts put to flight Ned's thoughts all of a sudden.

"Hello, what's up?" he muttered, running forward as the crowd ran.

From the doors of a large meat market two or three men were piling out as if for their lives. A policeman, rushing up valiantly, club in hand, turned with them after a glance ahead.

"It's a mad steer!" yelled the foremost of the flying men.



The crowd swayed back at the announcement. Then it did not wait for the completion of the man's explanation of how the animal, supposedly tightly roped in a shed, had got loose and invaded the shop, sweeping all before him.

For there was a terrific crash, and the bellowing monster, in an attempt to pass through the doorway, crushed the wood and glass panes of the obstructing barrier as if it was an eggshell.

Out came the steer, and there was a wild scramble. Women screamed, men dodged into the nearest stores, venturesome urchins mounted boxes and awnings, and filled the air with noisy clamor.

The steer made a rush down the street and dispersed a hundred frightened pedestrians. Two wagons, locked in a frantic effort to escape, barred farther advance. And, content with riddling the tailboards with a couple of ugly horn thrusts, the monster, lashing its tail and bellowing till he could be heard half a mile away, made straight for a red shawl hung in front of a dry-goods store, slipped on the smooth stone walk, went half through the great glass window, and snorting and pawing, remained there viewing his surroundings with a lurid, calculating eye.

"Shoot him! shoot him!" yelled several voices.

"No, no," demurred the frantic owner of the animal. "He is blooded stock. He is to be shipped."

"I'll ship him!" pronounced the doughty policeman, and, drawing a revolver, he fired once without producing any effect on the steer, snapped his weapon several times, looked into its chambers, muttered something about his cartridges being at the station, and ran like a good fellow as the steer disengaged his bleeding haunches from the show window, preparing for an onslaught in some new direction.

"Do something—oh, will no one do something?" shrieked the proprietress of a candy and fruit store, whose wares were mostly on the sidewalk, and were therefore liable to destruction at any moment.

"Yes, I will!" rang out a clear, confident call, and Ned Brooks was its author.

In a calculating way for two minutes he had regarded the steer, now more frightened at the hubbub about him than enraged.

In a reminiscent way Ned's mind flew back to a scene where a doughty farmer's boy at Glendale had cut short the uproarious career of just such an obstreperous creature.

A slight emotion of contempt at the cowardice and helplessness of the hundreds around him was mingled with a certain thrill of pride.

He might not be up in city ways, but he fancied he could do what the staring, gawking crowd of people could not do—his knowledge was ahead of theirs in the present case, and for the present moment he was peer, superior to the best of them, raw country greenhorn that he was.

Ned acted as he spoke. He knew what to do and how to do it. A nimble run brought him in front of the dry-goods store. A heap of bolts of dark flannel cloth were piled up on a box.

He seized one. A shout of alarm rang out simultaneously. The steer had observed him, and made a savage cut in his direction.

How Ned did what he did next the crowd hardly realized, he moved so quickly. They only saw a mixture of horns, boy, cloth and splinters, as the steer's forehead struck the box. Then a cheer went up.

Ned was astride the mad monster. He had unloosed the bolt of flannel, jabbing its end across both horns, and with a deft, rapid movement he began winding coil after coil over them and the eyes of the steer.

Never heeding its roars, its plungings, its maddened kicks, he reversed his position, seized its tail and gave it a jerk one way and then the other, short, snappy, sharp, as if he would break it in two.

In harmony with these jerks exactly, the steer's bellowings now died down. Blinded, helpless rage had changed to fear. It stood still, it began to quiver.

"Quick! get a rope!" shouted Ned.

It was brought in half a minute.

"Tie it to the right fore leg and the left rear one. Here, hand me two of those hard turnips."

A man ran to a grocer's display stand and tossed the required articles to Ned, who planted one and then the other halfway onto the sharp horns of the steer.

When he jumped to the ground the animal was standing, shaking as if with the ague. Its muzzling halter was put in place. Robbed of its strength, a foot at a time it was forced in the direction of its shed.

"Good boy!" rang out a general shout.

"Hey, mincemeat, ain't you going to do the handsome by the lad?"

"Come, you come with me," ordered the fat butcher, crooking his fat forefinger to Ned.

Ned flushed and stammered, but he started toward the shop. The price of a new coat, of a pair of shoes, would not be unwellcome.

But he had not gone ten paces, when probable coats and shoes in prospect were relegated to the rear, by actual coat and shoes in plain sight.

Ned's eye lit on the same, Ned's course changed quick as lightning.

For the coat and shoes were the ones stolen from him that morning, and the thief wearing them, the dream-tracker boy, was just sneaking from the edge of the crowd down the street.

After the combination of boy, coat and shoes, now breaking into a sharp run, Ned Brooks put.

## CHAPTER VI.

### A HERO'S REWARD.

The crowd was somewhat astonished at his peculiar action. Observing the strange sight of a young hero running away from his well-earned laurels, it started after him to see what he was up to, and Ned's late thieving associate would soon have had two



hundred pursuers at his heels had not the steer, distracted general attention just then.

It slipped on the sidewalk, and, in getting up, poked its head through another window. The crash caused a shout, and the shout a new rush forward.

So, when Ned had darted through the crowd, most eyes were strained in the opposite direction.

"That's him. I see him, and I'm going to catch him," muttered Ned, doughtily.

The chase was started in the middle of the road. Down it Ned ran. The boy ahead turned and saw that he was recognized. The boy behind shouted for him to stop.

The fugitive wheeled at the first corner and was lost to sight for a moment. Ned redoubled his speed. His coat, shoes, cap and silver dollar comprised the stakes he was running for, and he was bound to recover them.

Rod by rod, yard by yard he gained on the fugitive. He was so near, after a run of two squares, that, as the latter made for the sidewalk to dart into some doorway or alley, Ned's hand just touched him.

Back off the curb he pulled him. They slammed against each other.

"Give in and give up," panted Ned, clinging firmly to the collar and the coat his enemy wore.

"Let go! I'll smash you!" hissed the dream-tracker boy, half turning, and swinging about a small bundle he bore in one hand.

It hit Ned, but it was soft and did not hurt him.

"I want my goods," breathed Ned, determinedly.

"You want a slugging. Let go. Won't you?"

This time the boy's naked fist was thrown out. As it met Ned's check and he was driven back, he realized that he was no match in strength for his muscular, hardened adversary.

The dream-boy slipped free and sprang upon the pavement. Ned lost a minute, gained it, came up with him again and grabbed his arm and stopped him, wheeling him clear around face to face.

"Oh, you will have it, will you?" snarled the boy between his gritted teeth.

Smack! came a second terrific fist blow. Ned went back like a falling brick. His head struck the stone sidewalk, and he thought it must have cracked open.

He got up briskly as he could, but decidedly muggy and weak. He was for calling out now, for the dream-boy was skirting the corner and would be out of sight in a minute.

Ned was after him again, but as he turned the corner the boy had vanished. He had dropped a bundle, however, which Ned picked up and examined.

"His old togs," exclaimed Ned, disgustedly. He did not like his defeat.

"I suppose he'll steer clear of me for the future," he ruminated, "for he sees I'm determined. Heigho! what am I to do now?"

What, indeed? It was getting along in the day, and he was no

farther ahead than at its beginning, except in the way of experience.

"That don't buy bread," observed Ned, cynically, "and I'm hungry. There's a few crusts back at the hermitage, but I hate to go there, and yet why not? It's a safe and cozy bunking place, if nothing more, and some time that dream-boy may sneak back there. I hope it. I'd stand the loneliness just to meet him once again. I know I shall never feel quite right till he and I have had it out, and one of us gets a good, old-fashioned black eye. There's the butcher's. Say! what's the matter with——"

Ned checked himself. He had unconsciously reached the scene of his recent exploit with the steer, and his interjection meant what was the matter with hunting up that munificent reward the proprietor of the meat market had promised him?

"It looks cheeky," reflected Ned, "but I saved a lot of damage, and I need all I can gather in just now."

Ned passed the boarded-up dry-goods store window, and hovered about the meat market entrance.

Excitement over the steer chase had not yet quieted down. There were no crowds in the street, but a coterie of wonder-eyed children were inspecting the smashed door of the shop, and prattling about the second Jack the Giant Killer who had braved the perils of the morning, while inside the fat old butcher was volubly detailing all the circumstances of the same to a party of chosen friends.

Ned smiled hopefully and drew a trifle nearer, as he heard him speak these very words:

"But for that boy, my bill for damages might be five hundred dollars instead of ten. I'd like to reward him. Gentlemen, I shall stay awake nights hoping he'll put in an appearance."

"Mister," fluttered Ned, his eyes twinkling, though somewhat abashed, "I haven't the heart to see your rest broken."

"Eh?" ejaculated the butcher, with a start. "Why, it's the very boy. Come here; come in."

He dragged Ned across the threshold in a rough, excited manner. He patted him and slapped him, and held him out at arm's length for the inspection of his admiring friends.

"That's the boy! here's the identical hero!" he declared. "I told him I'd reward him, and I shall. You wait a minute, bub."

He dove for the ice box. Ned felt a little mean at the thought of standing around waiting for a present. But then he had earned it. And he was a boy all through, and a seedy, hungry, prospectless boy at just that moment.

"Here," cried the butcher, all aglow with beneficence. "I never break my promise. That's yours."

"Gracious!" cried Ned, agog.

"Taken back, eh?" chuckled the man. "Sort of overcome? I'm not fooling. It's yours, all yours."

"Is it, now?" mouthed Ned.

"Sure; and say, lad, you deserve it. I don't grudge it," and he pressed into Ned's hands the magnificent reward of a magnificent act of heroism—a bologna sausage!

It was fully three inches thick and thirty long. If it had been caught in a loop it would have dragged along the ground



Ned looked blank, then astounded, then glum, and finally amused. It was a come-down from high expectations. For a second he was mad and wanted to fling the sausage at the head of its parsimonious owner, but a later thought sent a reckless laugh to his lips. He hooked his arm through the immense halter, nodded briskly and backed to the street with a slightly sarcastic smile, but the words spoken nattily enough:

"Thank you, sir! I am, indeed, quite overcome, but—everything goes."

"It's not so bad," he decided a little later, as he was seated on a rotted bench masticating the juicy sausage along with dry crusts. "There's enough for eight separate and distinct meals, so the old butcher has saved me from danger of starving for a day or two. Wonder what will come next? Hello! I declare if here ain't something right ready to hand."

Yes, and a startler—a startler of a weird, puzzling description.

He had gone to the rear door to get a drink of water from the sink faucet, when he became aware that it was covered with chalk marks that were not there when he had left in the morning.

The dream-boy could not have made them, for he would scarcely dare to return to the presence of his victim, and had not Ned just seen him a mile away?

No; Ned felt sure that the staring, glaring record the chalk marks delineated was portentous—that they meant something, but whose the hand that had placed them there?

Thrilling, Ned Brooks read them, convinced that he had come to one of the most significant guideposts yet placed along his path of life.

"Ned," the inscription ran, "wait here or come again. I have discovered the secret of the ages, and we are rich!"

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE WRONG NED.

Ned Brooks stared at the chalk inscription on the old door as if it held some writing of fate.

"Stay here," he muttered; "then somebody knows I've been here before?"

Who? Not the dream-boy? No; the handwriting was neat and classic as copperplate, and Ned was positive could not have been made by his late thieving associate.

"Or come back again," continued Ned. "Well, I shan't stir far, I'll wager!"

It was a message full of suspense, full of meaty surmise.

"I have discovered the secret of the ages, and we are rich," Ned read for the twentieth time from the queer scroll.

It gave him a queer feeling. To a boy who had anticipated dollars and had got sausage, all promises were leery, but there was a luscious, nabob-like touch to those words.

"We?" ruminated Ned; "then I'm in it, for, I'm Ned. 'Secret of the ages'—that smacks fine. 'Rich.' What's going to strike me?"

Ned fluttered around like a boy waiting for Christmas all the rest of that afternoon, and the echo of every outside sound made

him start nervously and fix his eyes on the hole in the brick wall, as if it was the mouth of some Aladdin-like cave, and the veritable magician of old himself was about to appear in his great act of turning everything into gold.

But no one came. Toward dusk the loneliness became monotonous, and Ned turned his attention to practical things.

He opened the bundle that the dream-boy had dropped in his flight.

Ned uttered a growl of disgust as he revealed its contents. They turned out as he had anticipated—his despoiler's old clothes.

"Shows his meanness," muttered Ned. "Wouldn't leave these here for me when he stole mine, but kept them to sell for the trifle they'd bring. Humph! a trifle it would be, too," he commented, inspecting the familiar brown and blue checked coat and cap, and the patched, misshapen shoes. "They'll do till we get 'rich,' though," he concluded, with a jocular grimace.

Ned donned the garments, hunted up his abandoned stockings, and felt more natural to be completely attired again.

He took another try at the sausage, felt tired, then bored, and determined on a stroll on the gay, lighted streets before he turned in for the night.

There had been a fascination for Ned about the crowded city thoroughfares after dark ever since he came to the city; but after taking in their sights for a mile or less he turned back for the hermitage.

"I'll just take one more peep at the chalk message, and then snooze till morning," he said, when he arrived there.

Ned went around to the rear door. Before it he halted, and at it he stared.

"Sho!"

Ned tapped his head and rubbed his chin. The writing was no longer there. There were streaks of whitey vagueness here and there, but all form and letter continuity had disappeared.

"He's been here," muttered Ned, disappointedly, "and rubbed it out for fear some stranger might read it—of course that's it—and he's coming again. I'm ten times more curious than ever, but I'm ten times more convinced of there being something in the affair. He's been here twice. Three times and out, Ned Brooks! you'll know your fortune at last."

Ned took his place on the bench and tried to sleep. It was no use.

He could close his eyes, but it was only to go over the events of the day in waking daze. If he opened them, every bush, tree and board of the old house reminded him of the mysterious chalk writer, and set his nerves on a new jump of conjecture and suspension.

Ned heard two o'clock strike from some distant steeple; then three. He was getting a little drowsy now, and was drifting off famously into the land of dreams, when there came a peculiarly startling sound.

Thud!

"What was that?" muttered Ned, sleepily, but sat up and looked around.

He turned and glanced toward the hole in the brick wall. The



noise exactly resembled that caused by a person landing on the soft earth from a short height.

"No, it's no one come yet," he ruminated. "Must have been an echo from the street. Eh? What nonsense!"

Ned had completed the circle of scrutiny by bringing his eyes across the house, and the ground intervening between it and his cozy garden couch.

Then with ardent exclamations he sprang from his sitting posture.

"It wasn't there before!" he breathed, staring directly at the ground where the moonlight cast a radiant glow.

Ned rubbed his eyes and continued staring. An inch at a time he advanced.

An inch at a time he bent over, till his body was nearly double, put out his hand and touched a yellow, shimmering oblong object.

Then he essayed to lift it with one hand, partly succeeded, caught it in two hands, held it nearer to his eyes, and dropped it on the bench with a startled, almost scared face.

He knew what it was now! The sense of weight and texture, of color—prescience, call it what you will, but Ned Brooks knew what it was.

"I heard it fall," he gasped, in a hoarse, bewildered way, and he looked up, but vainly. "It came down."

Where from? Meteorites were not of that shape or consistency, profligate Rothschilds were not around pelting cats with their treasures.

"Who dropped it?" breathed Ned, a-trembling; "how? Why here? for it's a brick—a solid brick of gold!"

Ned looked at the brick, and then up into the sky from whence it must have come, with a very much mystified brain.

"Raining gold!" he mumbled.

The "something more" began to happen. Past his head came whizzing a bundle, large but soft, as if made up of bedclothes.

Following it came something very heavy, for it struck a portion of the cornice and snapped it to flinders as if it were made of paper.

Whizz! hissed a third bulky object. Ned's eyes dilating, he shrank from the descending avalanche into a doorway, and stared at the litter accumulating.

A box whanged along the side of the house, and then a three-legged, sheet-iron forge or salamander, such as is used by tanners or plumbers.

Beside it lay a small metal kettle, and over against that a shapely, well-made crucible.

All these things were the promiscuous result of a fusillade that ceased as suddenly as it had begun. Queerly they had arrived, queer things they were. To what kind of a person, trade or outfit they could belong, Ned was at an utter loss to surmise.

"I'd like to know—" he began, stepped out from the doorway, looked upward once more, and found out all about it.

The old house had an ornamental tower to it. This had toppled in danger of falling, and had been braced up by wooden pieces—which ran from it to the brick wall of the nearest building.

These props were not three feet from the top of the next building, and climbing now from its roof to them was a man.

"Gracious!" goggled Ned, swaying.

For the lone figure aloft, that of a man with long white beard and snowy white hair, was almost spectral in the white moonlight.

"He threw them!" breathed Ned—"brick and all. That's his way of getting in here. My! he don't mind risks, crossing those flimsy boards. Who is he?"

"Hey!"

The man aloft waved his hand quite gayly, looked down and nodded.

"He sees me, he means me. Hey!" responded Ned, but weakly.

"That you, Ned?" sang down the man.

"It's me," gulped the wondering starrer.

"I'll be with you in a jiffy."

"Whew! this is—exciting, this is funny!" muttered Ned. "Who can he be? I don't know him, but he knows me. Oh, it's the man who wrote the chalk scrawl, sure. He said he'd come, and he's come. He said we'd be rich, and don't the gold brick prove it? I'm pins and needles all over."

The man disappeared in the tower. Ned drew again into the doorway to listen. He could hear the footsteps of the newcomer sound hollow and approaching on the various stairways.

Finally he was dimly outlined in the kitchen. He glided to Ned and gave him a hearty smack on the shoulder.

"On hand, eh?" he cried.

"Yes."

"Got my message?"

Ned muttered his assent.

"Good! I left word for you at Jellaby's, and thought you'd find me out. You are here alone?"

"Alone!" repeated Ned.

"That's capital. Now, then, I'll get my traps together. Thought it best to get settled without attracting attention, so I shipped them by the roof route. That forge wouldn't go through the hole in the hall. By the way, I threw down a brick, a yellow metal brick," proceeded the man, starting for the door.

"Yes, gold," mumbled Ned.

"Gold!" cried the man with a quick laugh. "Is it? Ha, ha! Well, if it is, it's only one of enough I can get to build a pyramid, a Solomon's temple, a twenty-story skyscraper. Ned, I told you last month when I was ready to use the services of a shrewd, close-mouthed fellow like you, I'd show you a plan that would dazzle your eyes stone-blind."

"Did you?" muttered Ned.

"And I'm going to do it. Secret of the ages! Mine—wealth of the Rothschilds—ours! Ha ha!"

He poked Ned gleesomely and chuckled. In the semi-darkness of the spot he could not see Ned's face. Had he done so he would probably have checked his free disclosures.

For as the man went outside, hunted up his brick on the bench,



dragged boxes, bundles and other stuff into a heap, Ned stood in the dark doorway mute and dazed.

The man had not given him time to talk other than by mechanical replies. The man had not given him time to think, and every minute Ned's wits went woolgathering farther and farther away from the center of coherency.

He was certain he had never seen the man before, and could not for the life of him guess how he came to know his name. The man referred to things he knew nothing about. That staggered Ned, but he was so mixed up, startled and dazzled, that he weakly accepted the situation, and waited to see what it would next evolve.

"Now, then," spoke the man briskly, coming back to the doorway, "we'll get those things into the house and talk a bit. Here we are, snug as bugs in rugs, eh, lad? And partners! Ned the trusty, Ned the prudent, Ned the sharp, shrewd and secret. Ho, ho! Hi!"

In a playful way he had caught Ned's arm and waltzed him into the moonlight. Of a sudden his tone of badinage dropped. He had caught a square sight of Ned's face.

"Hi!" he repeated, but Ned stood confused and silent, a veritable bump on a log.

The man had looked rather august and dignified at first. As he stared, however, his eyes took a kind of a gleam that changed his entire aspect. They were wicked, threatening.

"I thought you was Ned?" he said sternly.

"I am."

"Not the Ned."

"It's my name," gulped the other Ned. "You called it, and I answered."

"How did you come here?"

Ned shrank from the persistent questioner, who had become suddenly transformed from a genial, benevolent old joker into a mixture of judge and bully.

He listened as Ned gave a skeleton outline of his acquaintance with the old hermitage. Then he seized Ned's arm.

He led him silently, rudely, square up to the hole in the wall.

Before it he paused. There was a latent fire in his eye that brooked no cavil—he looked a man who could not be trifled with.

Giving Ned a push, he comprehended the close of the interview and his strict meaning in two forcible words: "Be off!"

## CHAPTER VIII.

### A WINNER AT LAST.

"Be off!" repeated the man, gruffly, and Ned obeyed.

He crept through the hole in the wall and behind the tilted sign with promptitude.

"Don't you try to come back; you'll find this place bricked solid—don't you go to blab about my secrets, either, or you'll get into serious trouble."

The words followed Ned to the door of the next building.

He stood there in a miserable daze. He was puzzled and disappointed.

He had got a taste of mystery, a glitter of opulence, and now the paradise of magic, mystery and millions was shut to him—it was intended for some one else.

"Not this Ned, some other Ned, any old Ned, but me—just my luck!" he muttered, a trifle bitterly. "The dream's over, the play's ended, and I'm Ned, the homeless, once more."

With a dreary sigh Ned started toward the street, but whisked back into the hallway very briskly for a tired boy.

After a while he crept into a doorway and lay down there. For a few minutes his wearied senses dwelt on the puzzle of the gold brick, its owner, his possible plan of riches, and the real Ned he wanted. Then he fell asleep.

When Ned awoke it was many hours after sunrise. Glancing to where the hole in the wall was, he saw that heavy boards blocked it up. The hermitage, with all its fascinating mysteries, was a closed chapter.

"I've got to hustle for food and lodging," reflected Ned. But first he ransacked the pockets of the coat he had on—the dream-boy's coat. They held a lead dime, a broken penknife, a little piece of steel that he decided was a picklock, and a sealed letter.

"To whom it may concern," read Ned. "Wonder what it is? Some rascally begging letter, or such, of the dream-boy, I suppose. I'll save it and read it later on."

Walking the streets was his occupation up to noon—down one thoroughfare, up another. A street peddler gave him a handful of peaches because Ned helped him gather up a spilled measureful, but that was all the luck he stumbled across.

Ned leaned against the protecting rail of a shop window to rest and think.

The window contained a big-lettered sign, and this the crowd was reading. Beside it was a velvet cushion. On the cushion was the number of the store, formed of hundreds and hundreds of pin heads, with a tag reading: "Guess the number of pins, and get a suit of clothes and ten dollars."

In a flash window and pins had come back to Ned's memory.

The second day of his arrival in the city he had read the invitation. It caught him. Unlike casual guessers, he had posted himself at that window, and keen eyesight and close figuring had held him there, till he was so sure of his ground, that he went inside and registered his guess.

Since then the episode had faded out of his mind. Guesses on beans in a bottle, on seeds in a pumpkin, he found to be quite common, and suspected that a large proportion of them were fakes.

This wasn't. No, indeed! His quickening breath, his sparkling eyes gave the negative as his glance rapidly traversed the large new sign overtopping the smaller one now.

It read:

#### GUESSING CONTEST CLOSED.

Number of pins in cushion: 922.

Closest Guess, No. 873—B. Edwards

"Whoop!" yelled Ned, and made a dive for the door of the clothing establishment.

A dozen curious ones followed to its threshold. Ned ran up to where three clerks were standing chatting.

"Want a suit!" he gasped.

"You need one, that's sure," retorted one of the clerks.

"Yes, sir, and ten dollars. That—that sign," and Ned pointed at the window.

"What of it?"

"I guessed."

"Good for you."

"No. 873."

"That's the winner."

"B. Edwards."

"That's the name."

"Then I've won!" shouted the happy Ned, aglow. "873—B. Edwards—that's me!"



## CHAPTER IX.

## "FOR MOTHER'S SAKE."

"I'm living at last!"

Ned Brooks came out of a restaurant, his first square meal for days under his brand-new suit of clothes, a toothpick tilted jauntily, nine chinking dollars in his brand-new pockets.

He was a brand-new boy. The clothing store made no more of paying their offer than of giving him a drink of water. The cashier asked him to duplicate the ticket he had handed in with his guess; the handwritings were compared, and Ned received a ten-dollar bill and an order for a fifteen-dollar suit of clothes, without any care whether he was B. Edwards or Edward B.

It seemed to Ned as if Dame Nature was intent on making him all over again, in his rapid metamorphosis from rags to respectability.

Ned was glad to be decently attired, because he could approach a man and ask for a situation, without having fluttering rags suggest that he was either very lazy or very unfortunate to get in such a condition.

He had got a sheet of paper and an envelope, had written out a statement, and this is what it read:

"Name, Edward Brooks; home, a country village; friends in the city, none; ambition, to succeed through hard work. Try me."

He had thrust this into his pocket with the "To Whom It May Concern" letter of the dream-boy, too busy with thinking to care to know the contents of the latter.

Down the street Ned sauntered. His plan was to enter every establishment where he saw "Boy Wanted" hung out.

A blind lane ran into the street where Ned momentarily paused to watch a breakdown.

"Say, bub," spoke a voice suddenly at his elbow, "some one wants you."

"Eh? what?" returned Ned, sharply eying the speaker. "I guess not."

"Oh, yes; yonder. He sent me after you."

The man pointed to a basement saloon with curtains half drawn, as if sunlight was a foe to its occupants.

"You can't lure me into trouble. Get out," pronounced Ned, tartly. "Let your 'some one' come out to me, if he wants to."

"He can't."

"Why?"

"Well—he can't, that's why."

"I never went into a saloon in my life and I won't begin now," said Ned, defiantly, and started on.

"Look—there he is, the fellow who sent for you," called out his companion, eagerly pointing.

A single glance halted Ned. The blind of the saloon was pulled aside. A wretched, haggard face peered out.

"The dream-boy—the boy who stole my clothes!" ejaculated Ned.

That boy was beckoning to him. For an instant the thought of his wrongs spurred Ned to make for him as for a criminal. Then he remembered. He was "a gentleman" now. He was free of the old troubles. Let the old combination slide—the finder's mystery, the dream-boy, the gold-brick enigma and all. The clear and legitimate was his new province.

But, as the dream-boy continued to beckon, there was a pleading something in his gestures, a certain desperation and woe in his face, that touched Ned inexpressibly—he could not tell why.

"I'll go!" he declared impulsively.

Ned shrank as he descended the steps of the saloon. He evaded a lot of men playing cards and drinking, and went to a solitary corner where his beckoner sat.

The boy's face was white and wincing with pain, and one limb lay across a stool in a helpless way that suggested injury.

"Hello!" hailed Ned, charily.

"I saw you, I sent for you. Say, sit down—I'm all broken up."

The dream-boy looked it. Ned was instantly disarmed. All the old sullenness had given way to furtive apprehension, the bold eyes were haunted with a despair that told of mental trouble of no ordinary character.

"Help me!"

For a moment the boy sat without speaking, and raised his eyes full of tears with the words.

"Why," spoke the astounded Ned, "sort of queer to ask me to help you, when——"

"When I robbed you—abandoned you?" broke in the other, his voice ringing with sobs. "You're right. I'm a scoundrel, a blur, a blot, but—help me! Shall I tell you something? I've come to the end of my rope."

"I'm sorry."

"I've come face to face with ten years in prison if I'm caught, and caught I will be if I stay in this city. I'm lurking in this den like a hunted rat, sick, wounded."

"What's the matter with your leg?"

"A bullet."

"How did you get it?"

"Don't ask—oh, don't ask!"

The dream-boy's face went down in his hands, and his form shook with weeping.

Ned guessed that, lured by some disreputable gang into burglary or thieving, the dream-boy's reward had been a bullet from the police.

"Listen," went on the latter. "I don't dare to go to a surgeon or a hospital here—they'd give the clew; but, say, oh, believe me! I've not a friend to help me but you. Get me to St. Louis. I've got a chance there to—to reform, to be honest; oh, truly! truly! I'll turn square around—I'm sick of all the past and its wickedness. Can you do it—will you do it?"

Through his frantic tears the boy looked at Ned's new attire, as if seeking encouragement in his changed appearance. Ned was reflecting deeply.

Was the boy in earnest—had he the right to help a criminal?

"Just one more thing," sobbed the dream-boy. "I'm no good, but I—I've got a home. I ran away from it. I was decent once, and I've got a mother. Sure as Heaven, sure as I think of her, bad as I am, I'll turn. Give me a chance for the sake of your own mother! Try me!"

He was down on his knees now. Ned lifted him, crying himself. Sincere or fraud, the dream-boy had won.

Mother! The name was a memory, the semblance a lonely grave; but the same had power to stir Ned Brooks as through a holy influence.

"I'll do it!"

"You will?"

"Yes."

Not another word, but business. Ned, anxious to get the unpleasant affair off his hands, the dream-boy half frantic lest he should change his mind.

Ned got a cab. The dream-boy was helped into it, and they drove to the uptown station of a railroad. A train left in half an hour.

Ned had just one dollar left when he placed the ticket to St. Louis and another dollar in the hands of the dream-boy, and saw him ensconced in a comfortable reclining-chair.

"Good-by!" said the latter through his tears. "Trust me, oh, trust me!"



"I take your word," spoke Ned, solemnly—"your word given to Heaven, your word given to my dead mother. Remember!"

"God bless you!"

Like a whiff of boy and train vanished, yet Ned stood gazing dreamily down the polished rails.

A presence seemed to haunt him—the dream-boy's broken benison, a blessing that was to hover over his path in a way he little dreamed a step or two farther along the course of his career.

## CHAPTER X.

BY PROXY.

Ned Brooks came back to his own affairs with a practical shrug of the shoulders.

"Only one dollar left," he grimaced. "I'm spending money pretty fast. Pshaw! who cares? I'd do it again. I've 'helped a worn and weary brother pulling hard against the stream.' Right or wrong, I feel the better for it, and now to hustle for myself." Ned got back to the business portion of the city. The day was pretty well spent, and after a half-mile stroll with no window announcement to be discovered of boys wanted, he was about to buy an evening paper and scan its help columns, when he noticed a dozen or more boys ranged along iron steps leading up to the office of a big mercantile establishment.

They were chatting and jostling, and seemed to be waiting for something, and curious Ned drew near and waited, too.

"What's up?" he asked of the nearest lad.

"Boy wanted."

"Eh?" murmured Ned, pricking up his ears. "I see no sign."

"Advertisement in the evening papers."

"Oh! you can't all get the situation?"

"No, they'll take their pick."

"Is it a free-for-all, then?" smiled Ned.

"Why not?"

Just then a carriage drove up to the curve; a very old man got out. Ned observed a gentleman at the office window wave his hand, and decided that the aged newcomer was the father of some member of the firm.

He drew aside respectfully to allow him to ascend the steps. The old gentleman took hold of the railing. The boys crowded ahead blocked his way.

"I say, fellows, stand back!" sang out Ned. "This gentleman wants to get in."

Ned's good-natured direction was followed out amiably enough, but in getting out of the old gentleman's way the boys crowded *en masse* behind him, so as to regain their positions of advantage.

An ominous crack echoed as they bunched against the railing. The old gentleman uttered a cry of alarm and plunged sideways.

"Grab him!" shouted Ned, abruptly, but was first at his side, grabbed him alone, hung on with might and main as he partly fell, and supported him, quite perturbed himself, as he saw what had happened.

The railing, pressed against by the crowding boys, had parted from its top slot, and that end coming loose, it dropped two feet.

Had not Ned grasped the old man he would have gone headlong into the stone-paved area twenty feet below.

"Father," cried the man Ned had seen at the window, appearing at the door with a startled face, "are you hurt?"

"Bless me—n-no, only shaken. Where's the brave fellow who saved me?"

But his son, whom Ned decided must be the "Thurston" of the "Thurston & Company" on the door, hastened his father into the office, while Ned tried to replace the railing.

"Which of you boys helped the old gentleman?" sounded a new voice, and Ned turned to face a clerk.

Twenty fingers indicated Ned. To Ned the clerk addressed himself with a pleasant smile.

"Mr. Thurston wants to see you," he said, and led Ned through an office, and into another, where were seated the old gentleman and the man who had helped him in.

"Are you the lad who assisted my father?" began the latter.

"Who saved me from a terrible fall, James," put in the old man, smiling at the flushing Ned, who mumbled something about "the railing getting loose."

But Mr. Thurston was sharp, businesslike, definite.

"You were waiting to apply for work, I presume?" he asked, eyeing Ned keenly.

"I would like work, certainly," assented Ned.

"Have you any recommendations?"

In an embarrassed way Ned felt in his pockets and drew out an envelope.

"I have a sort of statement," he began, stammeringly.

"Let me see it."

He took the envelope as if he had not a minute to spare, read it, handed it back, and entering the next room, said brusquely:

"Follow me, Wolfe!"

"Yes, sir?" nodded the cashier.

"Make an entry. New office boy. You sit down yonder."

"What name, sir?" asked the cashier.

"Edward Pollard."

"What?" gulped Ned.

Slam!

The private office door went shut, the proprietor disappeared, the cashier's pen scratched its new record. Ned wondered if he had heard aright.

"Ned Pollard!" he breathed. "Why, that isn't my name, I'm Ned Brooks. Oh-h!"

By chance his eye landed on the recommendation Mr. Thurston had just returned to him.

"Great goodness!" he gasped. "I handed in the wrong envelope. It's the dream-boy's 'To Whom It May Concern.'"

He opened it and read. It purposed to be a credential recommending as an honest, energetic boy, one Edward Pollard.

"His name is Ned, too, Ned Pollard. Oh, I understand who was the Ned the man with the gold brick wanted, now! But I must correct the error here. I can't be sailing under false colors. I must explain——"

What? Ned, half-arisen, plumped back into his chair.

To explain that the letter of recommendation was not his would involve other bothersome explanations, might change Mr. Thurston's opinion of him and his decision.

The business man's word had gone out, giving Ned Pollard work. To all intents and purposes he was Ned Pollard.

"Shall I let it go?" reflected Ned. "No," and he started for the inner office. "Yes"—as he caught a sight of his employer's stern face. "What's it to him whether I'm Tom, Dick or Harry, so I do my duty? What's the necessity of advertising who and where I am for my uncles to find me out? Humph! my old name's not exactly written on the scroll of fame. Ned Pollard, you have promised to make a new record. I'll help you do it. I'll make that name square, honest as sunlight, true as steel, bright as diamonds—by proxy!"

The die was cast, Ned Brooks was Ned Pollard from sheer force of circumstances. It was settled—it was fate.

Settled that a bright, energetic boy should do his level best, to find, when he had won success, that the laurels were credited to another.



But the motive, the soulful impulse was what would tell at the last—would prove that Ned Brooks was building better than he knew.

That in making a name for two, he was following that earnest, unselfish course that fixes our place "in time's Valhalla sure."

"Pollard!"

Ned started from his reverie. From his office door his new employer was beckoning.

Ned hesitated; the new name sounded so strange. Then he approached with a polite:

"Yes, sir."

"Report here to-morrow morning, and I'll tell you your duties. Your salary will be eight dollars a week."

That afternoon Ned rented a room near by, arranged for his meals at a convenient restaurant and, it looked to him, was making the brightest, most hopeful start in life that had ever fallen to a boy's lot.

"Ah! ready for work?" nodded Mr. Thurston, as Ned entered his office the next morning.

"Yes, sir."

"Have you arranged for your living accommodations near the store?"

"I have, sir. The mere mention that I was to enter your employ made it easy for me to get a nice, respectable place."

"Very well, you will enter on your duties at once. My father is responsible for insisting that you have a capability somewhat beyond that of an errand boy."

Ned flushed and fidgeted.

"Thank you, sir."

"So I am going to try you at collecting bills in the city trade. See the cashier. He will start you on your work."

Ned bowed and left the room. But still his conscience was not quite at rest.

Was it right? Was he wise in disguising his own proper identity?

"Let it go! It's too late now," sighed Ned, philosophically. "I gave Ned Pollard his liberty, he gave me his name. Let us see who makes the best use of his gift!"

## CHAPTER XI.

### NED, THE DETECTIVE.

In four days the ex-harum-scarum of Glendale had become a business boy of Chicago in the full sense of the word, and Ned Brooks enjoyed the transition.

The Thurston establishment was quite an extensive one. Its specialty was seeds, sugar, spices, dried fruits and baking powder.

This latter commodity had cost the firm a very large sum of money. They had purchased a meritorious formula for making it, had advertised largely, and it was to make collections where the same had been placed on sale that Ned was now sent out.

Within twenty-four hours he had demonstrated a natural aptitude for wheedling money due out of unreliable debtors, and hurrying up reluctant ones, and had become a general favorite about the store for his bright-natured, accommodating ways.

The big storerooms of the place had a strange fascination for Ned. There was something tangible about the business. They were not like the offices, where figures and white paper represented everything. Here was solid value, real goods.

One whole partitioned-off floor was given over to the manufacture of baking powder. Ned was very much interested in watching its development, from the mixing of the great white mass, through its weighing into pounds and ounces, to being encased in cans.

The last stage of these cans was where they passed over a long table to a young man, who set in a piece of tissue paper guaranteeing the purity and freshness of the contents.

His name was Winfield, and when Ned first saw him he decided that he was the surliest fellow he had ever met. He seemed mad because Ned was watching him, pretended he was taking up room, muttered something about "outsiders keeping outside and not interfering with insiders' business," and Ned voted he should never like the fellow, and some later developments proved that he had a good basis for the conjecture.

One afternoon, as Ned was passing through the main office, the bookkeeper hailed him.

"I say, Ned, Mr. Thurston wishes to see you," he remarked.

"All right," nodded Ned, and went straightway to the private office to the head of the firm.

Mr. Thurston waved Ned to close the door and draw near.

"I have something to say to you of a rather important nature," he began. "We are having some trouble in our baking-powder department."

"Not in the collection section, I hope?" ventured Ned, anxiously.

"No, not as to promptness, only as to amount. You understand, we have expended a great deal of money building up that line. We make a very superior article. At first it swept its way into popular favor. Lately, sales are dropping off."

Ned looked interested.

"About a year ago," continued Mr. Thurston, "the firm dismissed a partner named Crouch. Why, I needn't say, further than that his methods were not of our standard. He immediately started a rival baking-powder concern. It did not take. We filled the field. He tried to undermine and undersell us, but made slow progress. Recently, however, our sales, as I say, have alarmingly diminished. I at once suspected that Crouch was bribing grocers to drop our brand, or offering superior inducements. We employed a detective to look up the matter. Here is his report. It states that my surmises are entirely incorrect. The grocers have not been tampered with. The baking powder is going on its merits solely, and the grocers simply explain poor sales by the statement that customers like the Crouch baking powder the best, and therefore buy it. Now, I happen to know that it is not the best. It is poor quality, under weight, and has jumped into popularity so suddenly that I am suspicious."

"Yes, sir; of what, may I ask?" insinuated Ned.

"I hardly know, but the detective's report does not satisfy me. Underhanded work is going on that he has not traced. These detectives only look at the surface of things, unless interested. You are a shrewd, careful boy. I want you to take a week off from all other employment. I want you to probe, question, investigate, not the grocers, but the consumers. I want you to come to me at the end of the week with a definite explanation of why we are losing sales, and I believe you can do it."

"Yes, sir," murmured Ned, confidently, "I believe I can do it."

"That's all."

Ned knew it was all. Mr. Thurston closed a thousand-dollar deal and bought a penny paper on the same business principle—short, terse action, and that decided it.

The next day Ned put in visiting grocers and getting them to discuss the baking-powder problem, and the next he devoted to their customers.

"My! I've got a pretty big flea in my ear—several of them, in fact," he soliloquized, two afternoons later, as he entered the office in quite an excited frame of mind.

"Mr. Thurston," he announced, going into that gentleman's presence, "I have something to report."



## CHAPTER XII.

## A LIBERAL OFFER.

"About the baking powder?"

"Yes, sir."

"Proceed, only put it in a nutshell."

"Very well, sir. The grocers are friendly, and all right. The matter is with the consumers."

"In what way?"

"There is one general report—your baking powder is not so good as it used to be."

"Impossible! We exercise the same care, use the same materials."

"One can is all right, and the next is all wrong; and one lady, whose husband is a chemist, says he analyzed a can, and found it contained solic acid, a cheap tart counterfeit that is dangerous to health."

"Nonsense!" cried Mr. Thurston, quite angrily. "I see how it is—Crouch has paid this man to say that to injure our business. A better, purer powder than ours was never made. Does this complete your investigations, then?"

"No, sir. I consider that I have just begun them. Mr. Thurston, I intend to run this thing to earth, and I can do it."

"Take your time."

Ned bowed his way out. He had not told Mr. Thurston everything—he had left out his personal suspicions.

He was positive that something crooked was going on. He believed the customers, and he believed the chemist's wife.

In other words, Ned Brooks was convinced that the secret of the growing unpopularity of the Thurston baking powder could be traced to but one cause—the powder was being doctored.

Who by? Surely at the instigation of a rival. Yes, Ned was firmly satisfied that the Crouch people, in some inexplicable way, were putting the deleterious substance, the solic acid, into the pure article in order to break up the popularity and sales of the genuine brand.

"They probably buy big lots of the jobbers, doctor it and distribute it to the grocers. I'll investigate and see," decided Ned, "and I'll take a walk through our factory here again."

Ned investigated the process of manufacture at once. He had passed through the mixing room, the boxing room and the label room, and had come to the department where the top was put on by Winfield and the guarantees inserted.

Winfield was reading a letter as Ned approached, and did not at once notice the latter. Ned noticed him, however, and the letter in his hand.

His quick eyes could not help but observe both—his quick eyes took in two lines of the epistle.

They comprised a whole volume of revelation; they gave Ned a clew in a flash.

"We must put out another consignment of the doctored stuff," it read. "Act at once and——"

"Gracious!" gasped Ned.

"Eh? What—what you doing here?" demanded Winfield, coming with a frightful scowl and crumpling up the letter instantly.

"I was looking over the plant," answered Ned, calmly, passing on, and, he added, with an excited flash of the eye as he left the room, "nailing the truth at last! Yes, I've struck the clew. That fellow Winfield is at the bottom of all this mischief, and—I'm going to run him and the baking-powder mystery to earth before another sun rises."

Before another sun rises—Doughty Ned! Past adventures were to pale into insignificance in contrast with those that the next twelve hours held in store.

One—two—three—four—five—six.

"Now, then!" Ned Brooks murmured, expectantly.

In two weeks' time he had passed through the experience of a waif, an office boy, a collector and that of an amateur detective, and Ned confessed to liking the last career best of all.

That is, at the present immediate moment, for he was satisfied that he was about to do Mr. Thurston a great service—unmask an ungrateful employee, and cover himself with honor at the same time.

Ned had acted on two convictions, firmly settled in that thoughtful noddle of his during the developments of the day—some one was putting a deleterious substance into the Thurston baking powder, and the man whose hands the finished cans last passed through, the unfriendly Winfield, was in written communication with the parties to the fraud.

Therefore, Ned, after a sight of the telltale letter, had adopted and acted upon a single definite motto:

"Watch Winfield!"

The small remainder of that afternoon saw Ned ensconced in a doorway a short distance down the street from the Thurston establishment, and as six o'clock struck he awaited the coming of the man he was watching for.

The employees filed out. Finally along came Winfield, with his covert eyes and slow, shuffling tread. He was preoccupied with thought, and, as Ned took after him at an easy distance, seemed to have no suspicion of being shadowed and no inclination to look around.

Winfield walked on till he reached a restaurant. Here he ordered a meal that made Ned's mouth water, and he prolonged the hungry watcher's misery by devoting fully an hour to its various dishes.

Securing a cigar, Winfield took a leisurely stroll, finally struck off into a quiet side street, drew a letter from his pocket, read it over twice as he walked on slowly, and then, reaching a high office building, entered its portals.

"That's probably the letter I saw," theorized Ned. "He's mightily interested and thoughtful over it. What's this place? Is he going to visit somebody, or does he room here? Hark!"

Ned got past the doorway and bent his ear keenly. He could hear echoing ascending footsteps.

"Going up the stairs—he's at the third flight. The elevators have stopped running and the place is deserted. I'll venture to keep him in view."

Ned began the trail; it ended on the seventh floor. Winfield unlocked a door, entered a room, lit the gas, and leaving the door open and slipping off his coat, sat down at a table, drawing writing materials toward him.

"Yes, there is where he rooms; it hasn't an office look, for there's a bed and lace curtains in it," declared Ned. "He's taken that letter out again. He's answering it. Oh! for a peep over his shoulder."

But that Ned hardly dared venture. He peered from the balustrade of the iron stairway and reflected, and planned, and watched, but drew back behind the elevator shaft netting as Winfield, a completed letter in his hand, came out into the hall and approached the glass mail chute to drop it through the slot to the box below.

"I feel as if that letter would just tell everything," murmured Ned. "Ah! he's changed his mind, torn open the envelope; going to add a line or two and then mail it. Say! my! I will!"

Ned hurried down the stairway and around to the elevator



on the next floor. At its side ran the letter chute. He approached and studied its slot.

"It can be done," he breathed excitedly. "What's that notice? 'Five hundred dollars' fine and two years' imprisonment for defacing, obstructing or plundering.' I'll risk all that. I'm tapping a robber; I'm helping the law. Can I get ready in time? He's coming! Yes!"

Flip—swat!

The downward flight of the letter just put in by Winfield made the first sound; its abrupt stoppage two feet from Ned's nose the second.

He had simply bent a card at both ends and inserted it inside the slot at his hand. Acting as a box, it had of course caught the descending missive.

There it balanced—only a thickness of glass and a rim of nickel between Ned and its coveted possession. He had trapped his hare. How to get this hare out of the trap was the question now.

Ned took out his pocketknife as a plan struck him. He depressed the card and the letter dropped two inches. One blade of his knife was a buttonhook. He jabbed a hole through the letter and then twisted the hook through it, pulled, caught an end of the envelope through the slot, pushed the card clear, let the letter drop, and drew it up through the slot.

"I've done it!" breathed Ned, aglow, but shaking.

Then scared at a thought of the consequences if he was discovered, he put down the stairs three steps at a time.

At the street door he paused to catch his breath—to gaze at the superscription of the letter as well.

A thrill of exultation took away all the dread that had hovered a minute previous. Every suspicion was verified—proof, actual, convincing, was certainly within his grasp, for the letter was addressed to the Crouch company.

"It's plain as daylight," declared the excited Ned. "The letter I read over Winfield's shoulder was from Crouch, directing him to keep on tampering with the baking powder; the one I've got probably promises to do just that. Solic acid is spoiling Mr. Thurston's powder, and Winfield, the precious rascal, has been bribed to break up his business, and help a rival by putting it in the cans just before they leave his hands. I'll get to Mr. Thurston with my information right away. No, I won't," he corrected himself, a second later, as footsteps sounded on the stairs. "That's probably Winfield. I'll complete a good day's work by seeing what he's up to for the rest of the evening."

Down and out came Winfield. Ned took up the trail again.

He decided not to pursue it if Winfield's actions indicated that he was bent simply on a casual stroll, a visit to a place of amusement, or anything of that sort.

But Winfield walked so briskly and looked so meditative that Ned was sure his mind was still on business, and trotted patiently after him.

They had gone on thus perhaps for half a mile, and Ned slowed up to accommodate his progress to that of the man he was pursuing, when something happened so sharply, so suddenly, that his head seemed to spin.

"Hey!" broke upon his ear, and a firm hand gripped his arm.

Ned wriggled and turned. A white-haired, white-bearded man was staring eagerly down into his face.

"Don't you remember me?" he demanded.

"Eh? why! oh, yes!" stammered Ned.

Yes, of a verity, for looking around him Ned saw that he was directly beside the enormous sign front that shut in the mysterious old hermitage from the street.

"Why!" he exclaimed, "you're the man—the man who threw the gold brick!"

"Yes," smiled the other suavely, "that's me."

"Well, don't stop me now," expostulated Ned, trying to break away. "I'm in a hurry, I'm after a man—what do you want of me?"

His captor had held firmly onto Ned despite his efforts at release.

Bending his lips close to Ned's ear, he whispered seven impressive words that gave the wondering Ned seven distinct thrills and shocks:

"Boy, I want to make your fortune!"

### CHAPTER XIII.

#### "RAZZLE-DAZZLE."

"Boy, I want to make you rich!"

Ned Brooks wavered in his pursuit of Winfield. The magnificent offer, the magnificent words and the magnificent manner of their speaker dazzled him.

"That's a big thing to say," he murmured luxuriously.

"And I can do it. Come in."

"Where?"

"Here. There. See?"

Ned did not see much. He experienced a jerk. Something opened like a spring flap, something shut like one, and he felt as if he had been shot through a solid wall and it had closed up after him.

"Why," he cried, amazedly, and looked around, "we're inside the big sign front!"

"Sure! I've put a door to the street beyond the platform here, but I'll defy any one to even find its cracks. Sit down; you're kind of flurried. Look around. Get your breath."

Steps and a platform had been built up to the new exit to the street. Ned rested against the railing and peered about him. Except for this change the old hermitage was precisely in its original condition.

He had no care to regain the street in any particular hurry now, for Winfield was, of course, out of sight by this time.

A week previous he had declared that he was glad to forget the dream-boy, the hermitage, the gold brick, and all that weird and unprofitable section of his past; yet curiosity and interest had now been awakened like living sparks in his mind all of a sudden.

Ned's august-looking host watched Ned's face closely for some time before speaking.

"Sort of wonderful how I came to hail you?" he queried suavely.

"Just that," admitted Ned.

"It was queer. I was standing outside my secret door here looking around when I saw you coming. 'Whew!' says I, 'toggled up!' But I never forget a face. 'Good!' says I; 'my wish to hand. I want a smart, intelligent boy. Here he is.'"

Ned looked straight into the speaker's eyes challengingly.

"Say," he projected, "am I any more smart and intelligent than I was the night you found out I wasn't the Ned you supposed, and fired me as if I was a spy?"

"Eh? Ah!" stammered the man. "Times are different."

"Are they?"

"Radically. It was another Ned I wanted, and I'd pick him now if he was at hand, but I can't find hide nor hair of him."

"He is staying away from Chicago, then," murmured Ned.

"Not being able to locate him," pursued Ned's host, "I must get a substitute. I've got to have one—one I can trust. You've



seen something of me, and can guess I'm back of some grand plan, can't you, now?"

"Yes, I've had such ideas, I'll confess."

"And I am. Let's get down to business. See here, you're working, aren't you?"

Ned nodded affirmatively, and told where.

"Better than ever," chirped the old man. "It shows you're reliable, and I've got to have a reliable helper. Here's a square proposition. Will you give me your evenings from seven to nine if I promise to make it worth your while?"

"What doing?" asked Ned.

"Easy work."

"And honest?"

"Honest as—as star-gazing," declared his companion volubly. "Turn it over in your mind, don't be in a hurry. Plenty of boys in the world that will jump at the chance, only I've taken a fancy to you. Here you are! Bright career of a progressive business boy's days, very proper, very elevating; sure accumulation of wealth nights, the real stuff, the rhino. Isn't that a great combination? Why, in five years you're a Stewart and a Rothschild combined!"

Ned fluttered. He was captivated. If from eager curiosity alone, he must know what lay behind the dazzling offer.

"My evenings are my own," he announced after a long spell of thought.

"I'll engage them."

"For so much money?"

"No; on a percentage basis."

"On what?"

"Selling something."

"And that is?"

"Something I make."

"What?" insisted Ned, pressing his point tenaciously.

"Gold!"

#### CHAPTER XIV.

##### THE TABLES TURNED.

The remarkable statement of Ned's new acquaintance fairly took Ned's breath away.

"Gold!" he voiced amazedly.

"Exactly!"

"You make it?"

"I make it."

"What out of?"

"Mud, water, air. I've discovered the secret of the ages."

"Then you're an alchemist?"

"No, I'm not. They turn dreamers, mostly; I'm a gold-maker."

"And you can produce it?"

"Just as fast as I like."

"I don't believe it!"

"Proof talks, don't it?"

"I suppose so—yes, sir."

"Come here."

Ned's companion led the way across the garden. At the back kitchen door hung a lantern.

The man took this down from its hook and started to enter the house.

"Hold on," he halted. "I'm Deiderick."

"Yes, sir—Mr. Deiderick."

"And this is Deiderick's laboratory. Now we know each other. Take a peep."

The room had changed since Ned last bunked there.

A small forge stood in one corner. Opposite it was a furnace. Set into its bricked top was a crucible.

Half a dozen pots and casks lay around. One was filled with water, another with sand, the others with odorless colored liquids.

"That furnace is ready to light, you observe?" remarked the man to Ned.

"I see that," nodded Ned.

"What you see in these receptacles here cost less than ten cents."

"That's cheap enough, in all reason, sir."

"With the exception of one ingredient, I am ready to begin my experiment."

"Does it take long?"

"An hour or less, and I'm going to try it for you."

"I'd like to see it," confessed Ned.

"Exacting one promise," put in Deiderick, with marked emphasis, "for I take your word, and that is that if you decide not to go in with me, you are never to mention what you have seen me do to-night."

"I promise that, sir."

"Very good. Wait. Got a pencil?"

Ned produced one. The man fumbled in his pocket, drew out some papers, tore the blank half from an envelope and wrote on it.

"You go to the drug store two blocks west and get that stuff—two pounds of powdered alum. Simple, isn't it? Twenty cents a pound, forty cents for a bar of gold. How's that?"

Ned was too bewildered to tell how it was. He simply took money and paper from Deiderick and walked to the door in the big sign.

"Whistle twice, once low and long, when you come back," directed the man.

Ned found himself on the sidewalk again, somewhat like a person in a dream. But for the money and the paper in his hand, he might have decided the strange events of the past fifteen minutes to have been purely imaginary.

He started up briskly, as he acutely realized what a wonderful thing it was if Deiderick was right in his statements.

"I want some powdered borax—no," began Ned, two minutes later, planking down the forty cents on the counter as he entered the drug store he had been sent to. "Here it is, Alum—alum, two pounds of powdered alum."

The man had that article of common use ready in pound packages. He put the two on the counter by the time Ned had straightened up, for Ned had stooped over.

The occasion of the movement was the fact that in fishing for the paper with Deiderick's directions on, he had also drawn out the letter he had taken from the chute—Winfield's letter.

It fell face upon the floor. Ned covered it, but in doing so narrowly escaped the graze of a foot slipped forward as if to prevent him.

"What are you doing, sir?" he began, got up, and confronted the writer of the letter—Winfield himself!

His face was white as chalk, his lips were trembling, his eyes snapping. Ned discerned the merits of the situation in a flash.

Winfield knew, as everybody at the Thurston store knew, that he was on the baking-powder case. What must have been his feelings, his suspicions, when he saw that letter—his letter, mailed an hour before, in Ned's possession!

For a minute those two looked squarely into one another's eyes—Ned with the dogged, defiant stare of a detective detected, Winfield overcome with stunning wonder, dread and amazement commingled.

Ned picked up his packages of alum. What was Winfield doing at the drug store? Was it an accidental meeting? Could it be



possible that he had turned shadower and had followed Ned here?

No, Ned knew that he must have passed him unnoticed as he came in, that Winfield was waiting for an order to be filled, for just then a clerk sang out:

"Here's your solic acid, Mr. Winfield!"

Solic acid! The last of the final clew was in Ned's possession, for that was the substance that had been put in the Thurston baking powder, to its detriment, and here was where Winfield was buying it.

"Let me pass," spoke Ned, as Winfield put out a shaky, detaining hand.

"Wait a minute. I would like——"

Ned dodged by him. He got to the door and out on the street. He saw the white-faced Winfield hurrying after him. Ned quickened his steps; Winfield quickened his.

"I want to speak to you—a few words," gulped the latter, overtaking him.

Ned backed to a police patrol box at the edge of the sidewalk.

"Speak out, but keep your distance," he specified. "I know what you're after."

"I want to know how you came to have a letter I mailed an hour ago, yes."

"Very well, Mr. Winfield, candidly, I 'swiped' it, as the street boys say."

"You stole it!" cried Winfield, getting very much excited.

"You robbed the mails. It's a penitentiary offense. Give it up or—— Where's there a policeman?"

Winfield had grabbed Ned. Evidently he hoped to frighten him into surrendering what he must know, taken in conjunction with his purchase of the solic acid, would be irresistible proof as to his guilt in the matter of doctoring the baking powder.

Just at that moment, by a fortunate accident, a man came around the corner. Ned recognized him at once. It was the detective, Turner, whom the firm had first employed. Ned called to him. Explanations followed, and, in spite of Winfield's expostulations, Turner took him into custody.

Ned was free to return to Deiderick. He had delivered up the intercepted letter to the officer. Could he depend on his not bungling the case? He fancied he could.

"It's best in his hands. He knows the firm; he'll end it up better than I could, and let him have the credit of it. It's the gold-maker now, anyway."

Two whistles, a low, long one and a quick, loud one, brought Deiderick to the secret door in the big sign, when Ned reached the hermitage.

"Got the stuff?" inquired the gold-maker, admitting him.

"Yes, sir."

"Now, then, all you've got to do is watch, but I'd feel very much disappointed if you didn't go into the partnership."

"Why, I don't see why I shouldn't, if it doesn't interfere with my duties at the store."

"It won't."

"And is all straight and regular?"

"As a die."

"Then I am sure I will be glad to go in with you. But what am I expected to do?"

"Sell the gold. See here, lad, you've got sense, and can understand that for me to pile it out wholesale would be to get a crowd of harpies and spies about me. No; I'm going to produce a little at first, sell it quietly, not glut the market. For all I know, I may not be able to get it perfect every time. Come in."

He had a blazing fire under the crucible now. Ned saw that it was empty. Deiderick put in a gill of sand, of water, of various

colored liquids. He stirred the steaming mass, and then put a cover over it.

Ned watched in silence. How ridiculous! he told himself—how impossible were the predictions of the alleged gold-maker.

Still, he was intent, anxious, hopeful. He saw the man betray, or affect considerable excitement, as he again lifted the cover and stirred the mass.

"Quick! where's the alum?" he demanded.

"On the bench outside."

"Bring it in. It's almost ready. Quick—quick!"

Only for a minute were kettle and operator out of Ned's sight. When he returned with the two packages, Deiderick was stirring like one mad.

"Pour 't in."

Ned emptied one package.

"The other."

Ned tipped the second bag of powdered alum.

Clink!

The mass steamed furiously, the rapidly-moving spoon hit something metallic at the bottom of the crucible.

"It's forming!" cried the man.

Ned was greatly excited. It all looked like a legitimate experiment to his enrapt senses.

"Out of the way!" ordered Deiderick.

The gold-maker dipped the spoon deep.

Out came a yellow, glittering lump, big as an apple.

He flung it hissing and steaming to the floor.

Into the crucible Ned had seen nothing go but sand, liquid and the alum—out of it his wondering eyes saw a solid mass positively come.

The man tapped the smoking nugget with his spoon triumphantly.

"Was I right?" he demanded. "Listen, look, feel—gold, pure gold?"

## CHAPTER XV.

### AN ENEMY FOR LIFE.

"Gold!" cried the money-maker, and he hit the hot nugget another musical tap, and glanced shrewdly at Ned to see how he took it all.

"You made that out of alum, water and sand?" voiced Ned half articulately.

"Didn't you see me?"

"I—I certainly did. It's marvelous, it's incredible. Say!" cried Ned, desperately, "I can't take it all in. It don't seem real."

"Don't try to. Just reap benefits. Put the lump in your pocket."

Ned did so.

"To-morrow morning go into a jewelry store. Let them test it. See if it's pure, O. K. Toward noon slip in again. Ask if they want to buy it. They'll inquire where you got it. Have a Thurston card ready——"

"Hold on! I don't like that," demurred Ned.

"Only as a guarantee of your respectability—a pointer that you can be found, straight goods on deck, when wanted, at all hours. Let them think some proud family in poor circumstances has melted down their rings and pins rather than pawn. See? You are simply agent for the parties who don't wish to be known. Take it or leave it at ten dollars the ounce, come here to-morrow night, and we'll talk further business."

"You put an awful lot of confidence in me to trust me with five hundred dollars worth of your property!" insinuated Ned.

"Because you're honest; just as the jewelers will think you're honest when you show you're connected with the great, spotless



Thurston firm. Business transaction; divide profits. Do you, or don't you, do it?"

"Yes; I'll do it. Why, what's that?" interrupted Ned, as a stirring, cracking sound echoed from some part of the old structure.

"Oh, the wind, rats, rotting timbers," answered Deiderick, quickly. "It's settled? Yes. Don't lose it."

No danger of that! As the man hustled Ned out through the little sign door, without giving him time to think, the latter grasped, rolled, pinched that rough nugget over and over in his pocket. He had never been responsible for so much value before. And part of it was his! How much? Why, if only one per cent., at the gold-maker's possible rate of production, Ned saw immeasurable riches!

"If it turns out brass"—began Ned, and checked himself. "I'll follow orders," he decided, "and know to-morrow. I'll carry out the programme just as directed."

Ned then decided to go to Mr. Thurston's home. The detective might have taken Winfield there. If not, at all events, the merchant would be glad to learn the remarkable developments of the evening.

Just as Ned reached the place—in fact, just as he gained the lower front step of the mansion—its great doors were opened suddenly.

"Go, go, sir! ingrate and scoundrel that you are. But for your free confession I would land you in jail."

Ned's employer was the speaker, and his face was white and angry as he ushered out a shrinking, cringing visitor.

"It's Winfield!" breathed Ned. "The detective brought him here. It's all over, the truth is known, the case is ended."

"It's hard lines on me, sir," whined the abject wretch. "Mr. Thurston, I'll play into your hands and doctor Crouch's wares, and break his business up for a consideration——"

"Bah, you reptile!"

Down the steps came Winfield, and an indignant foot-thrust helped him.

"You immeasurable thief! How dare you suggest such villainy?" roared Mr. Thurston. "There will be no need of circumventing the Crouch outfit by underhand means. Before to-morrow night the police will make this conspiracy public. I advise you to take advantage of my leniency and get out of the way before the explosion comes, for some one is going to get hurt."

"Ha!" hissed Winfield, coming to a stock-still halt.

He glared in an envenomed manner at Ned as his malevolent eye fell upon him, recognizing the author of all his present troubles.

Coolly Ned passed on, cringingly the other faded back; crime headed downward; honesty headed upward—up the steps, and up the royal ladder of success one more rung.

"Pollard, my dear young friend!" Never had Mr. Thurston greeted his employee so fervently as now, seizing his hand and drawing him into his library with nothing but warm words of commendation.

He told of the arrival of the detective with the culprit, Winfield. The latter was forced to open the intercepted letter and offer its contents for inspection. It proved, as Ned had surmised, that the Crouch firm had bribed him out of malice and rivalry to break up Mr. Thurston's business.

Frightened with the visions of jail, Winfield confessed everything. Ned's heart overflowed with satisfaction as he left the place half an hour later, followed by the grateful declaration of his employer that he had probably saved its great baking-powder interest from destruction.

"Guess it will be fast traveling up the business ladder now," chirped Ned, as he passed down the steps. "Say, what would the boys of Glendale think if they knew how I'm fixed; they simply wouldn't believe it. And the nugget! Ned, the model merchant; Ned, the modern Midas——"

"I've got you!"

"Have you?"

From the shadow of a tree a form had sprung before Ned, a hand fierce and trembling grasped his throat.

"Boy! you've done me the bad turn of my life to-night, you've hounded me down, you have ruined all my prospects."

"How about your ruining Mr. Thurston?" demanded Ned, partially extricating himself.

"Listen!" hissed the villain Winfield. "You're up, I'm down. Take care! I swear to devote my life to getting even with you. Brick by brick I will pull down the Thurston business into the dirt of ruin. See if I don't; see if I don't!"

"You're quite tragic, Winny," remarked Ned. "Let me go, or——"

With a snarl the baffled, infuriated miscreant flung Ned from him. Ned came flat, and the crazy bone of his elbow hit the pavement.

The pain was maddening, Ned had to utter a howl, and the utterance alarmed Winfield, who took to his heels.

"You villain," panted Ned, reached out for a missile, found none, tore the nugget from his pocket in his frenzied agony, gave it a fling and got up.

He saw Winfield turn the corner with a screech and a stagger. His hat fell off, and he did not come back after it.

He had vanished when Ned reached the spot and picked up the nugget.

"Yes, it's gold, right enough," muttered Ned, pocketing it and kicking the abandoned hat aside. "It's too heavy not to be. It's made a hole in that tile, and probably a bump on Winfield's head that he won't forget in a hurry. But now to forget him. Threaten? Bah! who's afraid of him?"

Who, indeed? For Winfield had been banished from association with all honest men that night.

For all that Ned Brooks had made of him the enemy of his life.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### THE ONE CHANCE.

"You can't come in here."

"Well, I guess so."

"Don't be gay, young man; this establishment is in the hands of a custodian."

"What?"

"Thurston & Company have gone to the wall."

Ned Brooks staggered back as if the rough-coated man seated in the office doorway, his big cane barring entrance, had knocked him squarely in the face.

It was a week after the unmasking of the treacherous Winfield, and things had gone well with Ned Brooks—"easy as sliding off a greased log," he had chucklingly denominated his rare upward and onward progress a score of times.

His name—his new name—had been in the public prints. "Ned Pollard," with the detective, Turner, was delineated as a shrewd, faithful employee who had run down Winfield's rascality and placed the Thurston baking powder squarely back in public favor.

Winfield had disappeared. Against his employer, Crouch, Mr. Thurston immediately brought a suit for heavy damages, and his attorney told him that Ned's testimony would be sufficient to win him his case.



The day following the revelation Ned submitted the nugget for the inspection of a jeweler. It was gold, pure gold, and the man gladly purchased it at ten dollars an ounce.

When Ned went to report to the gold-maker, the latter handed him twenty dollars, stating that he would devote a little time to getting his apparatus in better shape, told him to meantime pick out some new jeweler to sell the next batch to, as he did not wish to attract attention by too numerous sales to one individual, and that in a week he would be ready for wholesale business.

With this Ned was content. His success had encouraged the gold-maker to enter into manufacturing in a large way, he theorized. Soon things would go humming! And, meantime, he devoted all his energies to the firm's business, and was running one afternoon to report an exceptionally large order, when he found himself blocked at the office door, as has been related.

Ned gripped the iron railings in a spasmodic sort of a way, and stared vacantly at the gruff warden of the doorstep.

"Thurston & Company gone to the wall?" he muttered in an incredulous gasp. "Mister, you're fooling!"

"Am I?" railed the man with the cane; "oh, no! Shut like a clam till some arrangement's made. That's the ticket here, and all the clerks have gone home. Won't exactly say the sheriff is in possession, but mighty near it."

"Let that boy in."

Mr. Thurston's stern voice sounded beyond the glib custodian, and the latter stepped aside with cringing servility.

"Certainly, sir; only you said——"

"To admit no one without my word. I give it now. Ah! there is my father!" as a carriage drove up to the curb.

"Mr. Thurston—— Oh, sir! what does this mean?" voiced Ned, anxiously, with a pained glance at the merchant's white and worried face.

But his employer simply waved him to his private office, and Ned sat there, quivering with suspense and dread, until Mr. Thurston approached with his aged father.

"My son!" exclaimed the latter, sinking gaspingly into a chair, "what is this I hear?"

"Closed up, father."

"Oh, impossible!"

"No, it is only too true."

"But——"

"Crouch."

"Eh?"

"A retaliatory move. We showed them up as rascals in the baking-powder scheme, and Crouch is intent on revenge. How he did it I can't guess, but for a week he seems to have had agents out everywhere buying up our paper. He got a block of large notes due to-day and presented them this morning, just after we had checked out our last dollar at the bank for yesterday's claims."

"But you knew these were out—you should have provided for them."

"I did. I made a definite arrangement with the firm holding them to extend them sixty days. They were cajoled into selling to Crouch. He pressed for payment and I wasn't ready to pay—that's the long and short of it, and he has put in a custodian."

"Well?"

"Until noon to-morrow. If they are paid then, we resume. If not, a receiver will be appointed, and—we go under."

"Never!" cried the old man, springing excitedly to his feet and evincing more vitality and pluck than Ned had given him credit for.

"I don't see——"

"I do. You have till to-morrow noon to pay those notes. What is the amount?"

"Forty thousand dollars."

"Why, you could borrow double that on your note."

"Not to-day," negatived Mr. Thurston, with a sad shake of the head. "Sinking ship—you know the adage. Friends of yesterday are very shy to-day."

"Well, I have only a trifle in cash, but there's the street railway bonds, over two hundred thousand dollars' worth of them. You shall take them, borrow what you need, and then to give this Crouch the battle of his life."

Mr. Thurston's face brightened.

"We have only a few hours to act in," he said. "Where are the bonds, father?"

"Up at Geneva."

"Eh!" murmured Mr. Thurston, with a start.

"Yes; I had them with me when I spent a week there."

"I know, but you surely——"

"Left them in your safe there."

"Why, the house is closed up. And any tramp——"

"Is not an expert burglar. Oh, they're all right. Further, they are waste paper without any signature. Don't be alarmed, they are there, and if you will take a flying trip after them——"

"I don't dare leave the business, father."

"And I am not strong enough to undertake even that brief journey. Where is your cashier? Oh, Ned! Here we are. You understand the situation, I see?" nodded the old man, reading the sympathy and interest depicted in Ned's ingenuous face. "Will you go up to the lake for me?"

"Certainly I will," answered Ned, with emphasis.

"And be quick. There's a train at five-fifteen. You get to Geneva at eight. Hurry to the cottage, here's the key. The safe is in the little sitting-room. Get the papers. It's the only package in the safe, and hurry, lad. Catch the nine-twenty. You know these papers are no good to us after noon to-morrow?"

"Don't fear on the score of time; I'll fly!" declared Ned, animatedly. "I'd creep over red-hot gridirons to help the firm and get even with Crouch."

"I believe you would," affirmed Mr. Thurston. "There's the safe combination," and he tendered a perfiled slip of paper.

"Eleven, twenty-one, fourteen," read Ned, half to himself. "Is that all, sir?" he asked of his employer.

"Yes," replied Mr. Thurston, in his usual curt way.

"Yes," added his father; "only remember, Ned, you're carrying nearly a quarter of a million in securities, and at noon to-morrow they either put Thurston & Company on their feet, or see an old and reliable house sink under."

"They'll see it rise—rise like a balloon," predicted Ned, vociferously. "I know it—I promise it."

Ned hurried from the office and toward the railroad depot, so engrossed that he noticed nothing but time and progress. It did not occur to him that emissaries of the Crouch outfit might be among the curious gapers opposite the store, that his mission might be suspected, that the wily Crouch people might strive to outwit their enemies in their plans for outwitting them.

He caught the train. It was nearly dusk when he reached Geneva. One of the little passenger steamers that made a four-teen-mile trip around the lake after the arrival of each train was just leaving; Ned took it to a landing about half a mile from the Thurston villa.

He walked the rest of the way. "Eleven, twenty-one, fourteen" was running in his head all that lonely but rapid jaunt. How relieved he would feel to get the bonds, and back to Chicago safely and in time!



Ned unlocked the front door of the cottage. Inside, as he had been told, was a lantern. This he lit, and closing and re-locking the door, went into the sitting-room.

"Safe's all right," he murmured, glancing at the little steel receptacle in its accustomed place. "Whew! I'm hot with my walk, or the room's awful close."

Ned drew up a shade and opened a window.

Then placing the lantern directly at the side of the safe, he knelt and passed his hand over the combination disk.

"Eleven," he murmured, "twenty-one, fourteen."

Click! a turn of the knob and open came the safe door.

"There it is all right enough," he declared, making out the package Mr. Thurston's father had described, and he drew it from a pigeonhole and placed it on the floor beside the lantern. "Wonder if the drawers are empty as he supposed? This one is. Yes. That one? Yes. Why!"

To his feet with a shock Ned sprang; eyes dilating, he stared about him.

The package he had placed on the floor by the side of the lantern a minute previous, the quarter of a million dollars' parcel of gilt-edge securities was there no longer.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### WHICH WINS?

The valuable package just removed from the safe was gone, but in an instant Ned knew who had taken it.

"Winfield!" he fairly screamed, and dashed for the open window.

It took Ned perhaps four seconds to cross the room. In two he guessed what the abstraction of the package and his recognition of the thief implied.

He must have been followed clear from the city; Winfield must have crept noiselessly in through the window he had so carelessly opened while he was manipulating the safe.

Only a flashing glance Ned had of the fugitive, for Winfield had made a dive through the window. In fact, his legs alone were in the room as Ned landed against him.

Upon the floor lay a pan of tacks and nails and a hammer. Grabbing one disappearing coat tail of the thief in one hand, with the other Ned raised the hammer.

"I know you, robber! scoundrel! Throw back that package! throw—back—that——"

Crash!

Ned had a good chance to whack his enemy, and he had never driven a nail with the vigor that he now drove that hammer head against Winfield's squirming body.

Balanced across the sill, the half-in, half-out skulker began to roar and remonstrate.

Suddenly a dodging fling of his limbs struck the raised sash. It came down with a clatter, and there he squirmed, a prisoner.

What should he do? Ned asked himself excitedly.

At any moment Winfield might force up the sash, might shatter it. Ned dared not leave him to his own devices, even for the brief time necessary to get outside and head him off.

He grabbed one gyrating limb and pressed it against the wainscoting under the window—he picked up a long wire nail.

Through two folds of pants-leg he pressed it. Whang! whang! half a dozen hammer blows drove it tightly against the woodwork. He treated the other limb precisely the same. The part of Winfield inside the room was now as motionless as the pinned-down wings of a captive butterfly.

Ned drove a third nail over the dropped sash so it could not easily be forced up and, taking the lantern, ran to the door, un-

locked it, and hurried around to the little porch landing where wiggled his captive.

"My package!" was his first fierce challenge.

Winfield, purple in the face, trying to keep his head up by balancing on two finger-tips just reaching the floor, only groaned.

Ned did not have to repeat the mandate. Just beyond the captive on the porch floor lay the parcel and Winfield's hat, where he had dropped both.

Ned secured the bonds, set down the lantern, and waved the hammer menacingly at the squirmer.

"You sneak!" he iterated.

"Don't!" gasped Winfield. "I'm—I'm choking."

"Good enough for you!"

"I didn't mean to steal those bonds."

"Oho! you knew they were bonds, it seems?"

"Yes," assented Winfield, weakly.

"How?"

"Listened under office windows. But I wasn't to steal them—oh, dear me, no! Oh, honest, no!"

"It looks so, don't it? Oh, no, Mr. Winfield! you was only hard up for some reading matter, and wanted to look them over. Oh, dear me, yes!"

"No; let me loose and I'll tell you."

"What?"

"I was to keep them, detain you till it was too late to use them."

"Beautiful scheme! Well, good-night. I'll send the village constable up as I go along. Ta-ta. Pleasant dreams."

"I'll—I'll die!" snuffled Winfield.

"Good riddance!"

"My death will be at your door."

"No, only at Mr. Thurston's window."

"Ouf! Whoo! Murder!"

Ned had no intention of abandoning Winfield to his fate. It was a query what to do with such a dangerous enemy, but he could not leave him to suffocate.

He had drawn aside to tantalize his victim by making him believe himself abandoned, but as various evidences of strangulation echoed forth Ned stepped forward to release the sufferer.

Just then, however, desperation led Winfield to a mighty effort. A fearful wrench drove the window to flinders, a second wrench slitted his trousers along the detaining nails from the knees down.

Out on the porch on all fours he scrambled, rolled, got up and glared about him.

"Where is he?" raved the miscreant, unexpectedly liberated, "oh, where is he?"

That question Ned did not deem it wise to answer. Of a sudden, from a whining, helpless craven, Winfield had been metamorphosed into a raging, ferocious challenger.

Liberty had, it seemed, restored his courage. Ned saw he was in a temper for battle, Ned saw he was ready for battle, for suddenly Winfield drew out a revolver he could not reach until now.

"Whew! I'll make myself scarce," decided Ned.

"Stop!" shouted Winfield's voice as Ned started for the road.

"He sees me," breathed Ned. "Hammer to pistol? Hardly. He won't dare fire, he isn't quite as murderous as that."

Wasn't he! Once more the order to halt rang out. Then a shot.

"You assassin!" cried Ned, but kept on running.

"I'll bore straight through you, I vow I will!" vociferated Winfield. "Stop, I say!"

"I won't!"

Ned ran ahead and looked ahead. There were several villas near by, but none occupied. Near the side of the road, eighty



rods down it, were a couple of horses. They were saddled and grazing, but where were their riders?

Nowhere in sight, Ned discerned plainly, as he continued on, quivering and dodging as a second shot cut the air.

"It's getting serious," he panted. "No one to help me. Where's the owner of the horses? Some silly couple, meandering maybe a mile away, or sportsmen gone fishing in a boat. Cricketty!"

Ned howled, but limped on. A third shot had winged him. Somewhere between the knee and ankle it had struck—he felt a sharp pain and a warm trickle.

He was so near one of the browsing horses just then that it jerked up its head, almost touching him.

Ned reached out and grabbed the bridle. It backed.

"Stop!" roared the pursuing Winfield, nearer still.

"Oh, yes; catch me. Get up! get up!"

Ned had clung to the hammer. As he whipped nimbly to the saddle he reversed it and gave the animal under him a smart whack.

He caught an ejaculation of dismay and rage from his pursuer, and he fancied some distant shouts succeeded to his bold appropriation of the steed, possibly uttered by its owner.

Then, flying like the wind, a turn of the head notified Ned that the companion horse had been put into service.

"Winfield! he's mounted. It's even odds again after all," hazarded Ned.

Hardly. The road lined the loneliest part of the lake, the horse Winfield rode was the better speeder of the two. Ned recognized that instantly.

He dug his knees close and plied the hammer handle as a whip. The desperate race began.

Ahead a boy with a quarter of a million in his keeping; behind, a desperate criminal with four shots left in his revolver.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### IN TIME.

Ned breathed hard and thought harder as he urged on the steed he rode to its very limit of speed.

"He's got the best horse," muttered Ned, flinging a swift glance over his shoulder, "but I'm the best rider."

If there was anything in horsemanship, Ned believed he would win. There was no moon out, but the beach road was particularly clear of trees just where the race led, and there was not much chance of getting into hiding.

Ned knew something of the route. Three miles ahead was a camp alive with people clear through the season, and this side of that some hills and morasses and thickets, where he would be at home, where Winfield would be all at sea.

"I'll give him a hard nut to crack in a minute or two," chuckled Ned, thinking of a narrow water neck, beyond which a patch of reeds would afford him a chance to detour and evade if he could maintain the lead.

"Neck or nothing now!" breathed Ned, bending low. "On, good fellow—on! on! on! He won't take it!"

Ned nearly went over the horse's head. He had come to the water neck. To round it he should have diverged at a turn five hundred yards back, a point just reached by his pursuer.

The horse refused to enter the water. It came to a stop with a suddenness that shocked and unseated Ned. He fell forward, and despite a wild grab-out, landed on his head directly under the horse's feet.

The fall must have temporarily stunned him, for when Ned looked around him confusedly a distressing and dismaying situation of affairs was revealed. Winfield had come up as he lay there unconscious.

Around one of Winfield's wrists was closed an iron cuff, around one of Ned's wrists was its twin. A long chain connected the two. The two horses had stampeded.

"You see how you're fixed," grinned his malevolent captor.

Ned glared wrathfully.

"Here we are in the woods, Nature's solitude. Here we stay for to-day."

"And then you set me free?"

"Why not?"

"Bonds and all?"

"What bonds?" mocked Winfield. "What do I know about bonds? I look like a bloated bondholder, don't I! Only, when you go back to Papa and Grandpa Thurston, just tell them that you saw me—they'll know the rest!"

Ned chafed like a caged lion at the mean raillery. He understood, without any further explanation. Acting for Crouch and from personal motives of revenge, Winfield had but one idea in view—to detain Ned a prisoner and hold back the bonds until the firm's period of redemption had expired, and the great house of Thurston & Company was ruined.

And he had promised to be at the Chicago office on time with the bonds—had staked his word that the firm should not go to the wall! A realization of his impotence almost maddened Ned. He could not sit still. He got up, his fingers linked as if he would like to choke his captor; he chafed at the end of his chain like a helpless animal.

"Getting active?" sneered Winfield. "All right. I'm in for a walk to while away the time; only—no tricks. Put in your leisure hunting up nuts, if you like—it's all the meal you'll get till sundown, or me, either—but no larks. Try one, and—whack! you'll spend the rest of the day in silence."

Ned shuddered as Winfield brandished a heavy cudgel; he groaned in spirit as a sight of the revolver handle sticking from Winfield's coat pocket revealed that he was indeed in the power of a man having all the advantages of the situation.

Winfield jerked him along as if he was a helpless monkey at the end of a chain. He found some acorns, peeled and ate one or two, then some hazel nuts, and these tasting good, he began hunting in earnest for others.

"Fill yourself, youngster," he advised, noticing that Ned stood when he stood and moved when he moved, grumpily.

"Don't want any," snapped Ned.

"Please yourself."

"I will!"

Ned's eye suddenly brightened, and he threw some animation into the last declaration, although Winfield did not notice this.

Winfield had put his cudgel under his arm and was reaching for nuts at a great rate, thoroughly absorbed.

Ned sneaked near to him, sneaked back to the length of the chain, and then, fluttering for an instant, stood still.

"I've robbed this patch," remarked Winfield, cracking a final nut and turning around. "Well you are grumpy, aren't you?" he flung out at Ned. "Maybe you'll wish you'd taken a bite before I invite you again."

"I guess not," vouchsafed Ned, a certain expression in his eye.

"Maybe you've got too aristocratic with your high outings with the lordly Thurstons to eat anywhere but at the best Geneva hotels—ho! ho!"

"Mr. Winfield, you've just struck the cue."

"Have I?"

"For a fact, I decline to eat nuts like a squirrel, and I intend to eat my breakfast like a gentleman."

"Ho! ho! Come, now! That's good. You're amusing."



"Further," announced Ned, "I intend to start for Geneva right off."

"Hoity toity! I see you!"

"You do? Amble!"

"Eh?"

"Drop that club."

"Say——"

"March!"

"Who says so?"

"This!"

If ever a startled schemer looked down the muzzle of a revolver with a sinking feeling, it was Winfield at just that moment.

His own revolver, too! Ned had it. Winfield clapped his hand to his pocket. Down went the club, and Winfield fell to shaking.

"March!" ordered Ned, with a grim face.

"You forget you're tied to me with a chain——"

"You forget you're tied to me with a chain. Does it strike you that you're as much of a prisoner as I am?"

"You won't go to town this way——"

"Shut up, and get there, or I'll——"

Ned clicked the weapon.

"It got wet, it mayn't go off," began Winfield.

"Let me try it. There, take a sample of what I've got in my foot——"

"No, no!" cowered Winfield; "it will go off. I dried it. Don't! I'll march—I'll go."

Like the slinking craven he was, Winfield started for the road as directed. Like a stern Nemesis Ned followed at his heels.

It was just eight o'clock when they reached the town. Ned halted at the town hall.

He had only to tell the officer in charge that he was an employee of Mr. Thurston to secure attention. He had only to vaguely define the importance of detaining Winfield to see the latter locked up in a cell.

Then, the chain removed, he ran to a railroad time card tacked to the wall.

"Oh, dear, too bad! Is the train just gone the only one till——"

"Noon."

"I can't wait. I must be in the city before then," cried Ned in a fever of excitement; and he explained why to the officer, who knew Mr. Thurston very well.

Could he ride a bicycle? No. A horse? Like a Centaur—wounded foot and all!

"The horse'll make it if you can," declared the officer as, ten minutes later, he started Ned cityward, mounted.

"I'll get there!" observed Ned.

Fifty odd miles—first hour a round twenty. Ned drooped after that, got a drink of milk at a farmhouse, and put forward again.

What was the matter with his head? Dizzy. He shook off the megrims. How his foot hurt! Bah! a mere scratch.

Eleven o'clock! He had just entered the city limits. A park policeman checked his gait with a warning. Ned got beyond him and dug in the spurs again.

The half hour was striking as he came in sight of the Thurston store. It was two blocks away; he felt faint and was swaying in the saddle, but he could see a little knot of clerks outside.

"Whoa!"

He slipped from the saddle, took a step across the pavement and stumbled.

The cashier of the firm, standing by, stepped forward with a sharp ejaculation of amazement.

"Ned!" he exclaimed: "in this shape! Why——"

"Take me to the office—to Mr. Thurston—quick!"

"They're closing up."

"No, no—save them—bonds—in time."

Up the steps Ned dragged himself, with the aid of the cashier.

Past the custodian and to the door of the private office he staggered, the words falling on his ears in Mr. Thurston's despondent tones:

"We've only half an hour left. No use hoping. The boy has failed us."

"No; I'm here!"

The door swung open. In consternation Mr. Thurston, his father and the firm's attorney stared at the broken, battered fragment of humanity that reeled across the carpet—unkempt, with wet, clinging clothes, limping, exhausted.

Ned smiled, a faint hello issued from his lips, he lifted a sodden bundle from his breast, waved it weakly, and sank a helpless heap on the threshold of victory, uttering two triumphant words:

"The bonds!"

## CHAPTER XIX.

### HEMMED IN.

It is strange how things get into newspapers—a hint, a whisper, a keen reporter started on the scent, and a column or two is easily made out of a trivial incident.

Ned Brooks' last exploit, however, comprised no trivial incident. It had done him up completely, and he was an invalid prisoner for a week. The second day of his inactivity he knew that he had again got into print.

Thurston & Company deemed it best to let the public know the full rascality of the Crouch firm. It would set them exactly right in popular opinion, and it would unmask a commercial pirate.

The result was, that all the splendid exploit in which Ned had just figured was delineated in sensational fashion—Crouch was reprobated, Thurston & Company were put on their feet solid as a rock, and one paper wished that there was a medal of grit and common sense to award the undaunted hero—Ned Pollard.

Ned Brooks pulled no face at reading that name now. He had got used to regarding it as his own. Its real owner had, it seemed, entirely abandoned it and Ned, for, from the day the dream-boy left for St. Louis, Ned had not heard anything concerning him.

When Ned got around again, a little thinness, a little pallor and a slight tinge in one foot where the bullet scar was fast healing up, were all that reminded him of his desperate battle for a quarter of a million at Lake Geneva.

The Thurstons treated him as a gentleman, as a boy who had done his duty like a hero. Ned saw he had won both their regard and respect.

Mr. Thurston insisted on a week of convalescent leisure. He offered to send Ned up to the villa, but Ned said he rather fancied riding about the city and getting better acquainted with it in a business way.

Winfield had gone scot-free. Mr. Thurston arranged for Ned and a lawyer to go up to Lake Geneva and sustain a suit for assault, when news came that the wily prisoner had taken advantage of their inactivity during Ned's sickness, had obtained a writ of *habeas corpus*, and, giving a flimsy bail bond, had disappeared. Crouch undoubtedly stood back of him.

"I've got a week of leisure," reflected Ned, one afternoon. "It's more than that since I saw Deiderick, the gold-maker. I promised I would, and I'll go this evening."

Ned followed out previous instructions when he came to the hermitage just at dusk, but the long, low whistle and the short, loud one had to be repeated before Deiderick appeared.



The latter looked flustered, annoyed and undecided as he opened the secret door in the big sign front.

"Hah! I thought you weren't coming again. I heard you was sick," he spoke.

"Yes, sir, but I promised, and——"

"Good enough, good enough. I can give you something to do. I do need you, for a fact, and on quick work. I need some ready cash, right on the nail-head. Do you think you could sell a couple of pounds of gold right away?"

"You mean this evening?"

"Yes, at once."

"I think I can. I spoke to a jeweler and he said he would buy all I could bring at your price."

"Then here," said Deiderick, drawing an oblong piece of the precious metal from his pocket—"get the cash on that, and don't delay. I'm really in hard straits."

"Why, Mr. Deiderick," observed Ned, casually, "this piece isn't round and puddled like the other?"

"No, I—that is—it's different, yes."

"But you must have molded it?"

"Exactly. More convenient shape—see?"

"I don't see," murmured Ned, thoughtfully, but he took the gold and started on his mission.

When he came to the jewelry store where he had made his arrangement, he found it closed. He went also to the man he had sold the first batch to. He was eager to buy, but could not get the cash. He offered a check, and Ned put back for the hermitage to see if Deiderick would accept it.

"That's queer," he exclaimed, as, coming in sight of the big sign, he saw a stranger disappear through the secret doorway. Ned hurried his steps.

"Hello!" he ejaculated. "The door's open."

Open it was, an invitation to enter for any curious passer-by. Ned decided that Deiderick could not have closed it after sending him away, but was he aware that a stranger had invaded his secret domains?

Ned shut the door and ran through the garden, intent on announcing his discovery to the gold-maker.

As he got near the kitchen, however, he paused sharply.

A stranger! The plural was in strong evidence. There was not one stranger in the place, but half a dozen, and the flicker of the furnace firelight threw such radiance past the open door that they were sharply revealed.

Seven low-browed, villainous-looking fellows squatted and lounged about the benches and bushes, and near the doorway, his long iron stirring dipper in his hand, stood Deiderick, addressing them.

"You fellows want a bigger share, do you?" he was scowling. "Well, get it elsewhere, and don't bother me again. Have you ever dealt with a safer man? As soon as the boy comes back I'll pay you off. Then get out; I'll find new helpers."

"See here, governor," interjected a gruff-voiced fellow, "you must confess we're cut down pretty low, and those two watches I brought——"

"I tossed away," retorted Deiderick, contemptuously. "Silver! I'm no pewter dealer. Gold's my specialty, and nothing else. Silver don't go here, and never will."

"Oh, yes, it will. My dear friend, it goes like magic. What do you say to this?"

"Gracious!" gulped the staring, transfixed Ned.

He knew now the identity of the stranger he had seen glide through the secret door a few minutes previous.

It was Turner, the detective.

With the air of a man vested with irresistible power, with the

confidence of an official with the entire police department in easy call, with the sternness of a judge arraigning dread-inspired culprits, he had stepped from the shadow and confronted the amazed throng, and Ned did not understand his manner at all.

One hand held back his coat lapel, and one finger of the other hand pointed directly to 'the silver that goes here,' his star of authority.

"Turner!" gasped Deiderick, turning white.

"Followed! trapped!" snarled two of the men, springing to their feet with bristling mien.

"That's me," nodded the detective; "gents all, the favor of your company is requested by the chief of police."

"Down him!"

Ned smothered a wild shriek. At the words, Deiderick lifted the heavy iron dipper.

With a sickening crash it came down on the detective's skull. He fell back with a groan and lay like a clod.

Deiderick leaned over, grabbed him up, lifted him in his powerful arms, and bearing him in through the kitchen, threw him somewhere beyond, and returned to the doorway.

He faced the seven men, now forming a scowling, murderous half-circle about him.

"Is he done for?" demanded one of them, drawing a long knife.

"No."

"Then I'll finish him."

"Wait."

Click.

Deiderick's white face grew firm and grim as he drew and cocked a pistol.

"No gallows business here," he announced definitely.

"But——"

"I've said it. We move, we cover our tracks, but no killing."

"When that spotter has probably learned everything? Stand aside!"

The seven men made a combined rush for Deiderick. They tossed him aside as if he was a feather. They rushed through the open doorway.

The terrified, bewildered Ned had stood watching all these strange happenings like one in a horrid dream.

He could not make out why the detective should lurk around and confront those men in his official capacity, but he traced the malevolence of the wicked criminal in the officer's downfall, and murderous desperation in the actions of the men who had rushed in to end the gold-maker's work.

About to hasten to the street and call the police, Ned wavered, for a flare and frantic yells attracted his attention again to the kitchen.

The men who had rushed into it in search of the insensible detective rushed out again as precipitately.

What had occurred Ned could only surmise, but the kitchen was ablaze. They must have upset the furnace, or a stray spark must have exploded some of the gold-maker's chemicals.

"Get out of here!" shouted the gold-maker. "You've done it. There will be a crowd here soon."

"Fire will do for steel," jibed a big, lurid-eyed fellow. "They'll never find the detective."

"The detective!" screamed Ned, springing thoughtlessly into view. "Men, you won't leave him to burn up?"

"Aha! who's this?"

"Leave him alone," ordered Deiderick.

"He knows; he'll blab. Fellows, end all risks!"

"Save the detective!" shouted Ned, frantically.

"Look out for yourself!" warned Deiderick, quickly.



A man with a knife was rushing at Ned. The horror-scene was complete. Had he invaded a nest of demons?

They meant to dispatch him, too. Of that, however, Ned really thought little. Just then the detective's certain doom was more keenly in his mind.

The kitchen was a mass of flames. He knew that Deiderick must have thrown the officer in the room beyond. He made up his mind.

A cry of baffled rage and consternation rang out as Ned made a bolt for the fire-wreathed kitchen door.

Over its threshold he dashed. Through the billowing maze of flames he fought his way.

His clothing afire, his face blistered, his hair scorched to the scalp, Ned stumbled into the room beyond the kitchen.

"I've found him!" he panted, staring at a prostrate figure.

"He's alive!" murmured Ned, bending low for an inspection.

Ned Brooks had found the detective; yes, he had found him alive also—but of what avail?

For the man, lucklessly helpless, and the boy, keenly alive to the certainty that a horrible doom was tightening its grip with every swiftly-advancing moment, were completely hemmed in by fire.

## CHAPTER XX.

### GRIT TO THE CORE.

Ned tore off his blazing coat and stared about, gasping for breath.

"We're in a dreadful fix," he quavered in a low, awed whisper. "What is best to do?"

He did not waste any time. Headed right or headed wrong, action was the suggestion of the dilemma of the moment.

The fire had crept through two passageways around the room he was in. This apartment had no windows—in fact, it was a kind of kitchen storeroom, with only one other door.

Toward this Ned dragged the insensible detective. He dared not venture across the kitchen now. Its floor had probably burned through, and even if he got the officer outside, their enemies might still be hovering there.

A narrow, winding stairway started at the door Ned had gained. He would go up until he discovered a window.

He panted, struggled with his burden. He lifted, dragged, propped and pushed. Would the stairway never end? It wound round and round discouragingly. It had no windows, and as Ned finally saw its railinged top he discovered that he was worse off than ever.

The stairway ended at the attic. Ned deposited his burden on its floor. In one end was a window, but heavy planks covered it. The other end was taken up by the tower; from its rotted, dismantled side Ned stared down.

"That settles dropping," he shuddered, glancing far, far below.

Deiderick and his late associates were nowhere to be seen. At the big sign front there was a great hammering, and a crowd filled the street. Then a swirl of sparks shut out all view, and the attic began to fill with smoke.

"If I could only arouse the detective," murmured Ned; but Turner lay like a log.

Except that he breathed, there was no evidence that the blow with the iron dipper had not ended his career.

The fire was momentarily encroaching upon them. Ever and anon a crash would shake the building, telling of the fall of some rotted timber.

"We must get out of this, and we must do it quick, if we don't want to be engulfed," murmured Ned. "It's up, that's sure.

Well, Deiderick sent his goods down from the next roof, the tower prop runs four feet below it, and he descended that way. Can't we go up the same?"

Ned could. Arriving at the top of the turret stairs and coming to its open side, he observed that his own escape was guaranteed; but what of his helpless charge?

"I'll try it," came from Ned's lips, grimly but tremblingly, after a minute's deep thought.

He got Turner to the top of the turret stairs. A six-inch plank ran from the tower to the blank brick wall ten feet distant on a very slight slant.

It was simply a support to keep the tower from tumbling, and was held in place by its sheer weight.

There was danger of the plank giving way beneath a double weight; there was danger of toppling halfway across; there was the rising fire blast to brave; there were four feet to climb before the next roof was reached, but all these were inevitable concomitants to the only forlorn hope of escape presented.

Ned staggered as he got the limp, heavy form over one shoulder, with feet dragging. The pulling weight was crushing, he was half blinded, but across the plank he started.

Creak! the ominous sound seemed to crack a heartstring, but it amounted to nothing.

Across! Ned thrilled. Panting, shaking from head to foot, wedged up against the brick wall he stood.

He had passed the abyss. Four feet aloft was the next roof and safety, but how could he reach it—how even budge the crushing weight that made him stagger without toppling over?

He reached up one hand; he groped across the stone coping. It was fortunately narrow.

Ned took a tight clutch; then he began to pull himself up, an inch at a time, and with him rose his burden.

His bones seemed to crack as he got the head and shoulders of the detective across the coping. He pushed and boosted. Half the strain was relieved, but—he could not budge the form another inch.

All Ned could do was to prop the detective on a frail balance. Operations had come to a stop.

A blasting breath of fire swept up the brick wall, and Ned shrank. Another! He groaned in helpless horror.

Swish! A grateful spurt of water showered across him. There was a terrific hubbub below. Then huzzas. Something scraped the prop plank and it quivered.

Clinging still, Ned ventured to gaze down; the top of a ladder had dropped into place just at his side. He had been seen; he was saved!

"This man first—Turner, the detective!" he gasped, as a helmeted fireman came up the ladder to his side as two others approached on the next roof.

They took the detective up and they took Ned down. The passage to earth, out of the hermitage grounds and some way, somehow, to his lodgings, Ned never afterward remembered, although he did not faint nor drop on the way.

He was put to bed by the policeman who accompanied him. The same officer awakened him in the morning, and after his breakfast told him respectfully that the chief of police wished to see him for a few moments.

Ned could guess why—the mystery of Turner's condition needed explaining, and he could give it, and he accompanied the officer willingly.

No enlightenment as to what he theorized or knew did Ned receive from the grave, close-mouthed head of the service, however. He listened engrossedly to Ned's story, and said simply:



"Mr. Turner is at the hospital, delirious. I shall want to see you again when he recovers his reason."

"Yes, sir," nodded Ned, "but what was he doing there, and those criminals? The man who made gold——"

"He made no gold," interrupted the chief.

"Why, sir, I saw him——"

"My son," spoke the official, placing a gentle hand on Ned's shoulder as he led him to the door, "your action in saving the detective's life, your past record, tells me that you are all straight, but as to the gold-maker, as you term him—you have been grossly deceived——"

"But how? I can't understand——"

"Don't try to for a few days, and say nothing to anybody. We are after Deiderick and his crowd. When they are caught you will hear some very startling disclosures."

Ned proceeded to the store, revolving many theories in his mind that would fit the official's insinuations. They were disturbed as he entered the Thurston establishment by a hail from the cashier:

"Oh, Ned!" he called out.

"Yes, sir."

"A man has been here for you—in a carriage, and an invalid lady with him."

"For me? Why, who can it be?" murmured Ned.

"Don't know, but he was dreadfully anxious to find you. Said he'd call again, and asked where you lived very particularly. Ah! there he is now, alone and a foot this time."

A respectably dressed man just then entered the office.

"Has the boy I inquired for come in yet? He isn't at his room," the man began.

"Here he is," spoke the cashier.

"You wish to see me?" asked Ned, curiously.

"Yes," replied the man; "your mother wants you."

## CHAPTER XXI.

### A HARD POSITION.

Ned stared at the man as if he had taken leave of his senses.

"Say!" he ejaculated vociferously; "I guess not."

Ned held in holiest regard that name "mother"—its memories were too sacred to admit of jesting, yet he could not repress a faint smile at the inconceivable blunder his caller had made.

"Oh, no, I've made no mistake. I say your mother wants you, and she does. She's been here after you herself," persisted the man.

"Not me," dissented Ned, vehemently. "It must be some one else you are looking for."

Ned was about to add that his mother had been dead for over ten years, when the man questioned him sharply:

"You're Ned Pollard, aren't you?"

"Eh?"

With a sudden shock, the first wave of dawning enlightenment, Ned straightened up rigid.

"Isn't that your name?" persisted his visitor.

"They—they call me so," murmured Ned faintly.

"Then there's no mistake. Mrs. Pollard, your mother, is now at your room waiting for you and crazy to greet you."

"At my room—Mrs. Pollard! Wait! Let me think."

Waving back the man faintly, Ned sank swaying to a chair.

"My! he's overcome, isn't he?" Ned heard his visitor remark feelingly.

"Yes. Didn't expect it. Sort of shock," asserted the cashier. "A grand boy that, full of noble emotions."

The words cut Ned like a keen-edged knife-blade. A grand boy, was he? Yes, a grand rascal, a heartless deceiver! Full of

noble emotions? At that moment coward conscience half drove him to fly the city and bury himself in the deepest solitude.

For he was about to be unmasked, stripped of borrowed plumage, shown up as a double-dealing deceiver, and that, too, by a broken-hearted mother.

"I see it all now," he groaned in spirit. "This Mrs. Pollard must be the mother of the dream-boy—what will she say when she learns of my villainy?"

Ned put it extravagantly. He had done no wrong, but he was dreadfully rattled at that moment. He became more rattled as his visitor seated himself beside him and grew confidential.

"I understand the situation," he remarked. "You was a pretty hard lot a year ago, I learn, but you can imagine your mother's joy when the papers told of your heroic deeds. Lad, I'm no religioner, but the happiness you've brought to that poor old woman by changing your ways makes me believe in prayer. You know for a year she's been an invalid. She was dying by inches, mourning for the boy who ran away and never came back, when we read about you in the paper. 'My Ned! my brave, true Ned! he's come out right at last!' she cried day and night. We wanted to write to you. No; she must see you. Two hundred miles I've brought her, sick, helpless as she is; and now she's found you, she says she'll never leave you again. How pale you are, lad! You look distressed, instead of glad."

"I'll go to her. I'll make a clean breast of everything," murmured Ned, incoherently.

"Eh?" stared the man.

Ned started from the store. He felt fairly desperate.

"It's awful!" he told himself; "not what I've done; that won't look so bad, for I had no bad motives, but the terrible shock of disappointment of this poor old woman. Oh! what shall I say to her—how can I comfort her?"

Ned's heart was beating like a trip hammer as he opened the door of his room, the man close behind him.

"Mrs. Pollard, here's your boy, and from what his firm says, you may well be proud of him," cried Ned's companion.

In the center of the room sat a sweet-faced woman. Ned's senses were in a blur, but he noticed that her eyes were bandaged, her arms outstretched, her soft features suffused with an eager, seraphic glow.

"Ned, Ned! Oh, my lost, loved boy! Heaven is kind!"

Into her yearning arms the man fairly led Ned. The latter was shaking from head to foot. He was almost crying. It was pitiful—the deception.

"Speak loud to her, if you speak at all," remarked the man to Ned. "This last attack of erysipelas has left her pretty near deaf, and her eyes are so bad the doctor says the bandage must not be removed for a week."

Blind—or practically so? Like a drowning man clutching at a straw, Ned's heart took sudden hope.

A new idea had come to his mind; his avowed intention of confession was deferred. He must spare this happy, devoted creature a shock that might kill her, and he thought he could do it.

Mrs. Pollard had hold of his hand now, and was caressing it and pouring out her joy and gratitude.

Ned let her talk on. My! what a bad boy Ned Pollard had been. As her words let out a hint here and there, Ned Brooks realized that the dream-boy had, indeed, reason for his bitter remorse.

Ned spoke to the man who had brought Mrs. Pollard from the health resort where she had been staying.

"She can probably hear you better than she can me," he explained. "Try and tell her that I am happy to make her com-



fortable; that my landlady will give her a nice room, and attend to her every want, but that business will take me away for a week, maybe."

The man did as Ned requested. The mother's face shadowed at the hint of parting, and then it brightened.

"Only a week?" she smiled. "Why, then I shall be able to see him—the doctor said so. Oh, Ned! my dear, dear boy! how changed, how kind you are! Heaven has given me a new son, new life, new hope."

"What a scoundrel a boy must be to grieve a mother like that!" murmured Ned, as he left the house half an hour later.

The man who had brought Mrs. Pollard to the city had departed. In charge of Ned's landlady, she was bright and happy, and reconciled to Ned's avowed departure on a brief business trip, and now Ned was started to make that trip a reality.

The gentle, motherly attentions had made Ned's heart yearn; the happy, patient face had appealed irresistibly to him. He had a week's respite.

"I'll do one good deed if I can," he declared. "I'll make that woman happy in reality when that bandage comes off her eyes."

Ned walked straight to the residence of Mr. Thurston's father, full of a great, exciting idea. He found the old gentleman at home, and was warmly received.

"Why, Ned, you look worried," spoke the elder Thurston, with a concerned glance at Ned's pale face.

"I am," confessed Ned, gravely. "Mr. Thurston, I have a confession to make in confidence."

Ned told all then—what he had told to nobody else since his arrival in the city. He narrated the peculiar circumstances that had led to his adopting Ned Pollard's name; he outlined the consequences involved.

"Mr. Thurston," he concluded, humbly, "what do you think of a boy who acted as I have?"

"Think!" cried the old gentleman, excitedly, grasping both the questioner's hands. "Ned, my brave, true fellow! I think angels directed the impulse that made you seek to win for a broken name the glory of heroism and right doing."

"But what of the poor mother?" murmured Ned. "How can I face her when she sees?"

"Ah! that, indeed!" sighed the old gentleman, thoughtfully.

"I've guessed out a way," hinted Ned, timorously.

"Yes, Ned?"

"And I want your sanction. I want you to look after Mrs. Pollard while I am away."

"You are going away?"

"I must."

"What for?"

Ned's answer came clear and resolute:

"I am going to find and bring back the real Ned Pollard."

## CHAPTER XXII.

### FOUND.

To find a needle in a haystack—that was the task, theoretically, that Ned Brooks had set for himself to accomplish.

To find a needle in a haystack within a week—that was the limit of time allowed.

Ned left the city that night on the St. Louis fast express.

Behind him things were, in a measure, satisfactory. He had plenty of money in his pocket, and indefinite leave of absence, and Mr. Thurston's father had promised to see that Mrs. Pollard was well cared for.

Turner, the detective, was not yet rational, but the chief of

police assured Ned that he would recover, and asked him to report immediately upon his return to the city.

Before him Ned had a rather vague prospect. St. Louis was a large city, and he had no clew whatever as to the direct whereabouts of the object of his search.

The dream-boy might not even have gone to St. Louis—he might have deceived Ned completely, and, more distressing still, Ned might find him fallen back into his old ways, disregarding of past ties, and unwilling to return to the mother who so devotedly loved him.

At the end of three days, Ned had made up his mind that any discovery of the dream-boy would be purely accidental, for inquiries and tramping had not produced evidence that he had ever been in the river city.

The fourth day, however, Ned struck a clew—not to the dream-boy, but to the man through whom Ned had first got acquainted with Ned Pollard.

At a cheap show he had visited, knowing the dream-boy's predilections for such entertainments, Ned ran across a juggler who had known Ned Pollard.

He had not seen him since he was traveling with a pretended dream-tracker named Mapleson, three months previous, but he knew where Mapleson was.

Ned spurred up hopefully. Mapleson! That was the man who had Ned Pollard in charge the day the lost heifer was found at the farm of Ned Brooks' uncles—the man who had offered the dream-boy a hundred dollars to find Ned Brooks.

Ned was informed that Mapleson, just released from a jail sentence for swindling, and "down on his luck generally," was hanging around with a tent show playing at Legrande, Missouri.

"He may know something about the dream-boy," decided Ned. "I'm going to find out."

Ned reached the town of Lagrande that afternoon. A matinée performance was on. As he passed a sideshow, Ned paused.

"The Dodging Wonder" was the attraction. Through a canvas slit a human head was poked. For ten cents the investor was allowed to throw three balls. If one struck, he got a fine silver-headed cane.

A ball was just landing on the nose of "the dodging wonder" as Ned passed the place. A roar followed the hard smack; the winner moved away laughingly, with his cane, and the victim, withdrawing his head from the canvas, came out into full view, rubbing it dolefully.

"Why," exclaimed Ned, taking a second look, "it's my man!"

He approached Mapleson. Without any circumlocution, he informed him that he had ten dollars in his pocket to pay for any information that would lead to the locating of Ned Pollard.

"What do you want him for?" inquired Mapleson.

"His mother wants him, Mr. Mapleson; that mother is blind, helpless. It will be a mercy to tell me about Ned, if you know where he is."

"For ten dollars?"

"Yes."

"It will be a mercy, as you say, for Ned's turned good. I don't know what's come over him, but I met him in St. Louis last week. He shied off from me, but I hung to him for the price of a meal. He was working as a handbill distributor, but he said he was going to Belleville the next day to clerk in a general store there—away from the city's temptations. Said he'd turned squarely around, was living honest, intended to keep on doing it; had the cheek to advise me to mend my ways, and you'll find him at Belleville now. Thank you, sir; I need the money. Seems as if your face is kind of familiar to me."

Ned had never paid out money more willingly than he did that



ten dollars, and he drank in Mapleson's report of the dream-boy's reformation as if it was the pure cream of delight.

"Yes," he nodded, "Mr. Mapleson, we met once before."

"Where, now?"

Ned told him. He revived the scene at the farm of his uncles, where he had assumed the dream-boy's sheet garment and had played the dream-boy's part.

"Say!" exploded Mapleson, betraying intense excitement, "you're the boy that ran away?"

"That's me," acknowledged Ned.

"Say! I hunted for you. Look here! Where are you—where can I—that is, I want to make you a proposition," continued Mapleson, more excitedly still.

"What about?"

"A secret. Look here! I'm not prepared to-day, but I've got some information desperately important to one Ned Brooks. You're Ned Brooks. Where can I see you in—let me see—two days, a week?"

Ned handed him one of the Thurston cards.

"I'll be there after to-morrow—provided I find Ned Pollard, as you say I will," he added, significantly.

"You will. I'm not deceiving you. Next week? Young man, I'll astonish you!"

If Ned Brooks had not been so anxious to find Ned Pollard, he might have tried to find out more about Mapleson's pretended secret. He left that individual very thoughtful and excited. If it amounted to anything, Ned knew he would soon see him in Chicago.

Belleville was over in Illinois, and a lively coal mining town. Ned did not get there till after five o'clock in the afternoon. He was surprised to find the business street rather deserted, but glad intelligence greeted him as he entered the general store of the place.

"I am looking for a boy named Pollard," he said; "Ned Pollard."

"This is the right place to come to, then," affirmed the store-keeper.

"He works here?"

"Started in Monday."

"Is he here now?"

"No; he's gone where all the town's gone that can get there."

"Where's that?"

"To the mines. There's been an explosion of fire-damp, and fifty men are suffocating."

"Oh, dear!" murmured Ned, distressedly.

He had no difficulty in locating the mines, for stragglers across fields were all headed in one and the same direction.

Some five hundred people must have been grouped about a great, yawning hole in the ground, up through which came a vague sort of vapor.

Women were wailing, children weeping, men moving about with pale, agitated faces.

Others were just windlassing the lowering bucket to the surface. Ned got a peep through the crowd. He saw them lift out a man, white-faced and fainting. A groan went up from the throng.

"What is it?" asked Ned of a bystander.

His companion explained. The bottom of the shaft was filling with poison gas, which must soon spread to the working chamber, where some fifty men were imprisoned.

Twice they had tied the hose that connected with the air-pump to a miner's waist and had lowered him.

He had pulled the signal rope fifty feet down, overcome by the fumes.

"Unless they connect it soon, it's all day with the men below!" groaned Ned's informant.

Just then a cheer went up.

"What's that?" inquired Ned, pressing through the crowd.

"A new volunteer."

"A boy!"

Ned edged forward. He saw a boy standing on the edge of the lowering bucket. They had tied the connecting hose to his waist, and he was holding a wetted sponge to his nostrils.

"Shoot me down quick," he ordered, "and I'll make it."

"Pray Heaven you may," moaned a distracted woman.

"Stop that boy—stop!"

Incoherently, Ned Brooks parted the crowd. He jostled, scrambled, staggered his way to the mouth of the pit.

For the voice had made him take a second view of the brave volunteer's face.

He had found Ned Pollard!

"That boy!" he cried. "I must see him!"

"Too late—he's started down."

"Then I'll go, too!"

With a jump, to the amazement of the men at the windlass, Ned landed in the descending bucket.

Its occupant stared at him; two pairs of eyes met, and both honest eyes now.

"Ned Pollard!"

"Ned Brooks!"

Two pairs of hands met in fervent silence.

Then both shot down in the great iron bucket into the dread abyss of death.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### IN THE NICK OF TIME.

Ned Brooks had acted on one of his vivid impulses in jumping so recklessly into the descending iron bucket.

But Ned had only one idea in his mind at the moment of his rash leap—he had found the missing dream-boy, and he was satisfied.

The latter had instructed the men at the windlass to lower quick, and they were obeying orders.

Whiz!—Ned Brooks realized a quick descent, a dense darkness, a quick choking up, but he gasped ardently to his companion:

"I've heard about you!"

"Keeping my promise—leading a new life? Oh, that comes easy now!" was the bright rejoinder. "But what brought you here? I've heard of you, too, for it must be you that was in the papers—'Ned Pollard'—"

"Yes; I had to take your name. I come from your mother, Ned."

"My mother!" uttered the dream-boy, starting sharply.

"Yes; she found me out from the printed reports of Ned Pollard's doings—"

"She is at Chicago?"

"And thinks I am you."

"How can that be?"

"She is temporarily blind. She is at my home. She sees by this time. I came to hunt you up, for it would break her heart—if you—were not—there—"

"Ned! Ned!" shouted the dream-boy, catching the swaying, swerving figure that brushed him. "He's gone under—the gas!"

Ned slipped from his arms to the bottom of the bucket. At that moment there was a dull shock.

Tang!—the bucket struck the bottom of the shaft.

Utter darkness was around him, but the dream-boy had been



down that shaft on a casual visit of curiosity the day previous. He knew its outlines, and he knew, from careful descriptions, where to find the pumping apparatus, but as he clambered over the edge of the bucket, he staggered as if a weight was bearing him down.

The deadly fumes hovered, thick and penetrating. Not a second had he to lose. Over his mouth he pressed the wetted sponge. Then he grabbed the signal rope of the elevating gear, and gave the order to lift.

He was cutting off escape should he fail to adjust the pump hose or get to the chambers as yet free from the noxious fumes; but he knew that one minute of insensibility in that atmosphere might mean death to Ned Brooks, unable to fight the insidious fumes, and—he saved his friend!

Above ground the raise signal was greeted with a groan. It must indicate another failure, for time sufficient had not elapsed to adjust the hose attachment.

"It's empty!" shouted an excited voice, as the bucket appeared.

"No—one of them is in it."

"And the other?"

A thrill pervaded the peering throng. They could only surmise. Ned Brooks was lifted out, white and clammy; then the bucket was lowered again, ready for whatever might come.

"Stand aside!" ordered the leader of the party, as the crowd surged around the prostrate Ned. "Give him air and water."

"No water here."

"Get him over to the pump. He's turning hot. Bad sign, that; means an extra dose of gas. Douse and rub him, mates."

Four men carried the insensible Ned about three hundred yards to where, near the mine station of the railroad, a pump stood.

They did all in their power to revive him. Then, placing him on a bench at the side of the depot, one of their number propped him up, occasionally shaking and pinching him, to keep him from relapsing into the state of deathlike coma that had before prevailed.

Back at the mine there was great excitement—shouts, the sound of machinery, sharp whistles, calls, and a continuous hum of voices.

To all this Ned Brooks, was impervious. As the eastbound passenger stopped for a moment at the station, according to schedule, however, from nearly every car window heads were poked out, and a hundred sharp inquiries were directed at Ned's attendant.

"Mine disaster?"

"How many killed?"

"Fifty, maybe—none, sure. This is a sample of what the gas is doing," vouchsafed the man, holding up Ned.

"A boy!"

"Who is he?"

"A stranger."

Whistle and bell of the starting locomotive threatened to cut short the colloquy, when a man dashed from a platform, his eyes fixed on Ned.

"Stop, conductor, stop! I know this boy! For mercy's sake! what's he doing here? You say he is a stranger to you?" to Ned's companion.

"Just that. No one knows him here. Got into the bucket going down to save the men, and was overcome."

"Just like him. Same old Ned! Is he in bad shape?"

"Tolerable. Needs time to bring him around."

"All aboard!"

"Help me with this boy. I'll be responsible for his charge," shouted the man, and Ned was whipped aboard the parlor car, all unconscious of the agencies that circumstance was directing

to turn calculation and coherency topsy-turvy when he again woke up.

When he again woke up, he was back in his room in Chicago, and it was early morning. His head was aching, his limbs were sore, and he felt as if he had received a very general shaking up.

He was too weak to arise at once, but his mind sprang on the alert of suspense and excitement in a flash.

How was this? His room! Chicago! Was Belleville a dream—the mine, Ned Pollard, the bucket, the gas?

Hark! Voices! His room connected with an apartment given over to sitting-room purposes. Its door was half open.

"Yes, ma'am," Ned heard his landlady's voice say. "Ned was brought back about midnight."

"He is ill! My poor boy is in danger!" cried a poignant voice, that of Mrs. Pollard, and the listener thrilled uneasily.

"No, ma'am. Mr. Duncan, the traveling agent for Thurston & Company, says it's only the after effects of a poisonous gas he inhaled. He found Ned at a little mining town down in Illinois, all done out. Just like him—he'd been risking his life to save some entombed miners. Won't you wait till he wakes up?"

"No! no!" sounded Mrs. Pollard's eager voice. "Just one look at the dear boy's face. Think! Over a year since I saw it. The doctor says I may remove the bandage!"

"Stop! Stop!"

The words sprang instantly to the lips of the frantic Ned, but they must have been smothered by weakness or emotion, for they were unheard.

He saw the door open fully. Across its threshold stepped the gentle-faced woman who believed him to be her son. He saw her hand go up to the bandage to remove it. Ned groaned and closed his eyes.

The vital moment had come, and he could not divert the catastrophe. He felt that he could not endure the shock, the disappointment of the poor woman, who, in another instant, would know she was deceived.

He quivered with emotion. Then his eyes opened with a snap.

"Ned! Ned! my darling boy! The same dear face—only brighter, better. Oh, do I find you at last?"

Who was Mrs. Pollard talking to? Not the invalid. No. Ned stared; Ned thrilled, and almost crowed for delight.

For in the nick of time, at just that moment, the hall door had opened to admit a new arrival.

And the right Ned Pollard, the real Ned Pollard, was in his mother's arms!

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### THE LAST DITCH.

Ned Brooks' happiness was complete. He uttered a luxurious sigh of relief, as mother and son passed into the sitting-room.

So inspirited was he by the joyful ending of affairs that he got up and dressed, almost forgetful of the depressing weakness of a few minutes previous.

The hum of broken congratulation in the adjoining apartment had changed to other forms of expression now.

"Mother, I want to tell you a story," fell upon Ned Brooks' ears.

The story the dream-boy told was one old to Ned up to a certain point.

But he thrilled with a new kind of emotion as the narrator told how, ashamed of his past meanness, overcome by the magnanimity of a boy he had wronged, and who had given him nearly his last dollar to afford him a final chance to reform, he had at St. Louis changed his ways, and had found honest employment.

It must have been some of the heroic spirit Ned Brooks' ex-



ample in Chicago had infused that caused him to volunteer to go down into the mine to save fifty imperiled lives.

And save them he did. It was easy now to make light of the narrow miss he grazed in attaching the pumping hose, in creeping, half dead, to a remote working chamber, for he had battled desperate chances.

When the deadening gas had been lightened, and the men, one by one, were drawn up to the surface, Ned Pollard found himself a hero.

He found Ned Brooks vanished, too, but he soon learned how it was, and surmised that he had been taken to Chicago.

Thither the dream-boy, irresistibly attracted, had come to seek out anew the friend who had led his wayward footsteps aright, and the mother for whom his better impulses now yearned.

"It was not I, mother, who did all the noble things the papers attributed to Ned Pollard," he confessed. "It was brave Ned Brooks who took my broken, worthless name and put a crown of laurels around it, and bravest, noblest of all, to save you from disappointment, sought me out."

"Stop there, Ned Pollard!" cried Ned Brooks, and he entered the room impetuously. "Boil down all my trifling exploits and find the lives of fifty men saved by them, if you can. No, no, Mrs. Pollard; you may be proud of your boy. What he did yesterday is the deed of a century."

"Oh, is it so?" cried the dream-boy, brightly, as he caught Ned's hand and put it into that of his mother, who covered it with grateful tears. "Then we're quits. The world says 'Ned Pollard' rescued a great firm from ruin, gave back to the police force its best detective, 'Ned Pollard,' eh? Well, I played tit-for-tat. The newspaper men were thick as bees around the miners after the rescue. They wanted my name to herald to the world. I gave it to them. Look here."

Ned Brooks whistled in dismay, and stared at a newspaper quickly unfolded. There was the story of the mine rescue, four columns of it, and "Ned Brooks" was its hero. The long account was squared off. Ned Pollard and Ned Brooks divided honors, indeed!

There was a clean breast to make of it all to Mr. Thurston, Ned decided, but that turned out no hardship.

Nothing but admiration was expressed by the head of the firm, when, that afternoon, Ned called at the store.

He came away buoyant and excited. According to Mr. Thurston, all complications were pretty well settled, and he might start in at practical business the following Monday morning, in charge of all city sales in the baking-powder department.

"Can I hire a helper?" Ned ventured.

"Your namesake? Yes. A boy acting as he has deserves the past blotted out, and all the encouragement possible. By the way, Pol—I mean Brooks," continued Mr. Thurston, "our lawyers inform us that the suit against Crouch may come up any day. So hold yourself in readiness, for you are the main witness."

This remark was emphasized as Ned sat in his room just after dark with the dream-boy, discussing their mutual glowing business prospects, for the landlady interrupted them by appearing with the words:

"There's a coachman here says he is to take Ned Pollard to his employers' lawyers' office—Dickson, Attlebury & Murch. Which Ned is it?"

"That means me," nodded Ned Brooks. "I won't be long," he said to his companion. "Mr. Thurston spoke to me to-day about the case, and I suppose his lawyers want to get my evidence against Crouch in shape."

Ned ran down the stairs. A close carriage stood at the curb,

and its driver beckoned to Ned, helped him into the vehicle, slammed the door, and springing to his box, started up the horses.

"I hope I won't be kept long at the lawyers' office," began Ned. "What?"

A glinting flame from a fruit stand torch shot through the window suddenly, and opposite him sat—his old-time enemy, Winfield!

Ned made a motion toward the door handle.

"Is this——" he began.

"Business!" interrupted Winfield, catching Ned's arm detainingly. "You see, our side is pretty well posted. The suit against Crouch comes up to-morrow. It means a big sum saved if the witnesses ain't present. I won't be. Turner, the detective, is laid up. That telltale letter I wrote we recovered. There's only you, my dear young friend; if we could induce you to leave the country to-morrow, it might save Crouch half he owns, and it would put a life competence in my grasp."

"Well, I won't!" cried Ned, stoutly. "A trap, eh? Kidnaping? Do you think——"

Flap!

With a suddenness that evidenced careful preparation and practice, over the mouth of the speaker Winfield slapped a great plaster.

It stuck like flypaper; it shut out breath and utterance better than a gag. Ned put up his hands—they were instantly seized. He struck out. They were handcuffed.

"How's that?" crowed Winfield. "Wind shut off, maulers in quod. This is your last public act for a spell, my energetic friend, and 'The Missing Witness' will be a woolly mystery for many a month to come."

The occurrences of the ensuing half hour proved Winfield's talk to be no buncombe.

The carriage drove into a gloomy court. Ned was conducted up several stairways of a large, unlighted building, and was led into a sort of storeroom where a lantern burned.

"It's Crouch's warehouse," he theorized. "What are they going to do with me, anyway?"

Standing practically helpless by a window looking down on the street, he listened. Winfield was speaking to the coachman.

"Get the asylum man, quick, now!" he ordered.

"All right—only, say, we had a hitch-behind for a block or two after starting."

"Oh, don't bother me with stupid suspicions! Some mischievous urchin."

"No—an old man."

"Some lazy tramp, I suppose."

"I whipped him off, but, say! I vow I fancied he was lurking opposite the alley when we drove in here."

"Bosh! Get our man, and hustle the boy to his future home promptly."

Winfield grinned his most disagreeable grin at Ned as he entered the room and locked its door. He took out his penknife and slit the plaster so Ned could breathe more freely.

"Know where you're going?" he jeered. "Into the charge of a man running the safest lunatic asylum in the State. Oh, you'll get near no witness stand till he undoes the bolts and bars, trust him for that."

Ned tried to take things coolly. He was not frightened. A chance to escape would come somewhere along the line, he was confident of that, only he hoped it would present itself in time to make him of service in the suit in court.

"Ah! is that my man coming?" spoke Winfield, after a long pause, as footsteps sounded outside.

He ran and unlocked the door. The lantern shone quite dimly, and he did not fully make out his visitor till he had got clear over the threshold.

"Why," he ejaculated, with a start, "it's not my man! Here! who are you? Get out!"

"No," answered a definite voice, "not till I get what I came for—that boy."

Ned started. The "hitch-behind," "the old tramp," was revealed—Mapleson, "the dodging wonder," the dream-finder.

"You see, I've come 'way up from Missouri to find this boy," he spoke. "I followed the carriage. I see you are up to hocus-pocus of some sort, but I can't help that. I've got a claim on that boy first, and he comes with me."

"He don't!"



"Who says it?"

"I do."

"The best man wins!"

Slam! The contestants flew at one another like battling bears. Backward, forward, Mapleson down, Winfield up, Mapleson reeling, Winfield gone to one knee. Suddenly—

A jar, and both landed against a wire netting in one corner of the room.

There was an appalling shriek from Winfield as the netting tore loose. The two men seemed to go through it as if it was paper.

Ned Brooks held his breath, and grew sick at heart. Echoing knocks and a heavy thud ended in low groans, and then all was still.

Winfield and Mapleson had gone down the elevator shaft!

## CHAPTER XXV.

### CONCLUSION.

Ned was almost too horrified to move, but the opened-up way to escape urged him into action.

He ran to the door of the room. Just then it was violently pushed open. A low-browed, villainous-looking man confronted him.

"What's up—what was that commotion? Where's Winfield?" he demanded, hurriedly and suspiciously. "Oh, you're the boy! Come along."

Ned struggled, but he was dragged down the stairs. Reaching the court, his rough companion waited not a moment. He flung Ned into the carriage.

"Drive fast!" he ordered.

Ned sat in silence while half a dozen squares were traversed. His new captor never addressed him. Evidently his part of the programme was to get Ned out of the city and to his "future home," as Winfield designated it, and he was anxious to complete it as soon as possible.

Abruptly, the vehicle came to a halt. The horses had been going so fast that the shock of stoppage almost threw Ned from the seat.

"What are you stopping for? I say—" began the man, fumbling at the window to lower it.

"Police! police!"

"Confusion! What's this?" cried the man, forcing open the door.

It was a police station, and half a dozen officers, attracted by the call from the driver's box, were hurrying from it to the carriage.

That driver had sprung to the ground. Reversing his whip, he menaced back Ned's captor.

"Arrest that man for kidnaping!" his voice rang out sharply.

Ned Brooks stared stupidly. The tones were familiar; the speaker's face, coming into view, was more familiar still—Ned Pollard, the dream-boy.

Two officers had seized the struggling asylum man. By the time they got him into the station, Ned Pollard had given an officer an outline of the case.

Four men were detailed to hasten to the Crouch warehouse to find Winfield and the original driver of the vehicle.

Just as the plaster was removed from Ned Brooks' lips, the chief of the service, summoned from his private office, entered the station-room.

He recognized Ned with a smile, and his face grew grave as the story of the night's events was narrated.

Ned Pollard had seen Mapleson hitching onto the carriage that bore Ned away.

Somehow, his suspicions were aroused. He, too, had followed it. He had lost it on the way to Crouch's warehouse, but had recognized and followed it again as it returned with the asylum man.

Some overheard words between the latter and the driver put the dream-boy in possession of the merits of the case. When the driver, fancying they would be some time bringing their captive down, hurried away to get a drink, Ned Pollard mounted the box. The clever results of his assumption of a new rôle ensued.

That night's developments ended up the Crouch plot forever. Winfield, in falling, had broken one arm and an ankle. He would be a cripple for life, and when Crouch was informed of the failure of his last wicked plan, he made arrangements to leave the city, a disgraced man, at once.

Mapleson was brought to the station with some terrible bruises, but not permanently disabled.

When he got his wits back, he explained his business with Ned. The night he slept at the farm of Ned's uncles, he stated, in his usual poking, prying way, he investigated a bureau.

"I found a will there, lad," he told Ned.

"Did you?"

"Yes, from your cousin, who originally owned the farm."

"Go on," smiled Ned.

"It gave your uncles half the farm, you the other half."

"Indeed!"

"They never told you, eh? Now, then, if you will divide with me what you get, I'll give you the will for busting them."

"And so that is your great secret—your wonderful mystery?" laughed Ned. "Why, Mr. Mapleson, I knew that five years ago."

"You knew it!" gasped the discomfited Mapleson.

"Certainly. A later will established the rights of my uncles, and if forty wills favored me, I would not trouble those simple, honest old souls. No; they cared for Scapegrace Ned when no one else would, and now I'm able to make my own way, with no legacy but brains, and no capital but enterprise."

Mr. Mapleson departed the next day, a sadder, wiser man. That same afternoon Ned Brooks and his namesake went to see the detective, Turner, who was reported convalescent.

He welcomed with effusion the boy who had saved his life. Then he glanced suspiciously at Ned Pollard.

"Seems as if I've seen you before?" he remarked, the alert detective in an instant.

"If you have, forget it at once," insinuated Ned Brooks. "He's my friend, Mr. Turner."

"That's enough for me, lad—and now about your gold-maker, eh?"

"Yes, I'd like to know about him, for I've got a lump of his gold still in my possession."

"He'll never claim it, for he and his crowd seem to have left the country for good."

"But why?" asked Ned.

"To evade arrest."

"For making gold?"

"For making nothing," ejaculated the detective, derisively.

"That was a fraud."

"But I saw him—"

"Fool you—exactly. The crucible and the chemicals were all a blind. He slipped in the gold lump while you wasn't looking."

"Never!"

"Yes, he did. You see, he was at the head of a band of thieves, and melted down the gold they stole. Suspected characters, they had to sell it on the sly, and got very small prices for it. He devised the alchemist scheme to hide all that."

"Then," spoke Ned, rather sadly, "there are no gold-makers in the world, after all?"

"Oh, yes," came the prompt reply.

"Where?"

"You're one."

"Eh?"

"Aren't you? Why, lad, every ambitious, energetic boy is a gold-maker from the start. The ingredients are ambition, honesty, industry, and the crucible is experience. Isn't that true?"

Ned Brooks put his hand on the shoulder of the boy whose friendship had come to be a rare boon, whose good name and good fortune he had won by proxy.

He thought of the glowing business prospects that lay before them mutually, of the pleasant home life the restored mother's presence would insure.

"Yes, it's true!" assented Ned Brooks, enthusiastically. "but there's something better than making gold—making friends—and I'll never forget how mine have stood by me."

THE END.

The next issue, No. 48, will contain "A Dashing Fire Laddie; or, The Heroism of Dick Macy," by John De Morgan. This, as its name implies, is the story of a brave, true-hearted boy, who determined to become a fireman. It is replete with thrilling adventures and hair-breadth escapes, and it cannot fail to hold in breathless interest any boy who loves clean, wholesome excitement.



# Young Broadbrim Weekly

MORE READING MATTER THAN ANY 5c. LIBRARY PUBLISHED

**Price 5 Cents.**

Handsome  
Colored Covers

---

*Tales of the thrilling adventures of a young detective whose success in hunting down all classes of criminals is unequalled.*

---

## LATEST TITLES

- 52. Young Broadbrim, the Boy Detective;  
or, The Old Quaker's Youthful Ally.
- 53. Young Broadbrim in Kansas City;  
or, What Was Found in the Flood.
- 54. Young Broadbrim on an Aerial Trail;  
or, The Terrible Ordeal of Fire.
- 55. Young Broadbrim and Company;  
or, Solving the Mysteries of Rockwood.
- 56. Young Broadbrim Triumphant;  
or, The Girl Cracksmen.
- 57. Young Broadbrim Fighting an Unknown Power;  
or, A Scientific Murderer.
- 58. Young Broadbrim on a Weird Case;  
or, The Mystery of the Phantom Voices.
- 59. Young Broadbrim at Coney Island;  
or, Dandy Dick Shanghaied.
- 60. Young Broadbrim on a Newsboy Mystery;  
or, Dandy Dick's First Case.

---

To be had of all newsdealers or sent upon receipt  
of price by the publishers

**STREET & SMITH, 238 William Street, New York**